

A WEEK IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE



JOHN BYRON

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THE LIFE OF
A SLAVE



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FOR MY STUDENTS,
*from whom I have experienced much
joy and satisfaction.*

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CHARACTERS

Apphia The wife of Philemon. She is called “sister” by Paul in the opening of the letter to Philemon ([Philem 2](#)), which has led many to the conclusion that she is married to Philemon and mistress of their home.

Archippus A Christian leader in the Lycus Valley. Paul calls him “fellow soldier” in [Philemon 2](#) and exhorts him to fulfill his ministry in [Colossians 4:17](#). The mention of Laodicea just prior to Paul’s exhortation in [Colossians 4:17](#) could mean Archippus served the church there rather than Colossae. Later tradition held that he was the first bishop of Laodicea (Apostolic Constitutions 7.46).

Calmus A slave owned by Philemon who serves as the dye-works overseer in Colossae.

Demas A host of the church in Ephesus. Paul calls Demas his “coworker” in [Philemon 24](#), and in [Colossians 4:14](#) Demas sends greetings, suggesting he was well known by the church at Colossae. Second Timothy 4:10, however, indicates that Demas had fallen in love with the world, deserted Paul, and gone to Thessalonica. This tradition is more developed in the apocryphal Acts of Paul (Acts of Paul 3.1, 4, 12-14, 16).

Epaphras A leader of the church in the Lycus Valley and a companion of Paul. According to [Colossians 1:7](#), the gospel message was brought to the Lycus valley by Epaphras. Although no mention of Epaphras’s imprisonment is made in Colossians, Paul calls Epaphras his “fellow prisoner” in [Philemon 23](#). Paul notes in [Colossians 4:12](#) that Epaphras is always praying for the church in Colossae.

Eutyches A local believer and public slave serving as a guard in the Ephesus prison under the management of Tiro.

Magnus A slave who serves as Nympha’s household manager in Laodicea. Magnus’s name is taken from a fourth-century AD papyrus letter from Oxyrhynchus (Oxyrhynchus Papyri 12.1423) in which an Egyptian official describes the circumstances surrounding the flight of his slave, who stole some unspecified items and is residing in another city.

Nympha A woman in Laodicea who owns a medical-compound business and hosts the church in her home. In [Colossians 4:15](#) Paul greets Nympha “and the church in her house,” suggesting she was the owner of the house. She was probably a widow who attained a level of independence and freedom from male oversight of her business affairs.

Onesimus A fugitive slave owned by Philemon ([Philem 16](#)). The

name, commonly used for slaves, means “useful,” about which Paul makes a pun when he describes the value of Onesimus to himself and Philemon ([Philem 11](#)). He was converted by Paul and became close to him while the apostle was in prison ([Philem 10](#)). In [Colossians 4:9](#), Paul says Onesimus is a “faithful and dear brother, who is one of you,” suggesting he was from Colossae.

Paul Apostle to the Gentiles and author of thirteen letters in the New Testament, including the letter to Philemon. He is imprisoned awaiting trial.

Philemon A business owner, host of the local church in Colossae, and owner of Onesimus. A convert of the apostle Paul ([Philem 19](#)), he had a reputation as one who refreshed the hearts of the saints ([Philem 7](#)). Paul calls him “fellow worker” ([Philem 1](#)), suggesting he played a role in the ministry of the gospel, perhaps partnering with Paul in evangelistic work ([Philem 17](#)).

Tiro Manager of the prison in Ephesus and a local Christian who was once a public slave before gaining freedom and climbing the social ladder. Tiro is named after a slave once owned by the Stoic philosopher Cicero.

Tychicus A companion of Paul who calls him a “dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord” in [Colossians 4:7](#). According to Colossians, Tychicus is carrying a letter to Colossae and passing on news to the church. Paul also mentions Onesimus in [Colossians 4:9](#), which suggests Tychicus might have accompanied the errant slave to his home in Colossae.

EPHESUS

The Interview**THE KNOCK ON THE DOOR ECHOED IN THE CRAMPED ROOM.**

It was not a luxurious room, but it was more comfortable than most of the rooms in which residents lived. It was sparsely furnished with a bed, a small table, and a few stools at which its occupant could take meals, visit with a guest, read, and write. The floor was made of stone, worn smooth by the pacing of previous occupants. The current tenant was no different and indeed may have worn down the stones even more than the others had.

A benefit of this particular room was that it had an exterior wall and thus a window. Most residents were not so fortunate and typically were housed deeper inside the compound. But the window was too high to allow a view of the courtyard, even with the assistance of a stool. It offered fresh air and sunshine, but never the sounds of birds—the constant din in the courtyard either masked the sound of the birds or simply kept them away.

The current resident was in many ways not unlike previous occupants. He was accused of breaching the local law and awaited a trial. It was his Roman citizenship in part that provided him with the luxuries of this room. But the incessant din from the cobblestone courtyard and the occasional cries of prisoners being punished that came through the window were a constant reminder that he was not here by choice, nor was he guaranteed an escape from punishment should he be found guilty. Many of the previous occupants had themselves paced the floor, written a last letter at the table, and met with family for a final time all within earshot of the sounds in the courtyard.

The knock sounded on the door a second time. Preoccupied with the sheets of papyrus in front of him, the man hadn't heard the first knock. Now the sound aroused his attention, and he raised his head.

“Yes, yes, come in please,” the man responded to a third, more insistent knock. He moved from his stool to the door, revealing another advantage he enjoyed: no chains restricted his movement or shackled him to the wall.

The heavy wooden door swung open and revealed the figure of a prison guard. “You have visitors,” he announced. His face was partially hidden in the shadowy passageway.

“Thank you,” the man said. “Who is it this time?”

“Demas and a stranger.”

“Well, show them in.”

The guard stepped aside, and a pair of figures emerged from the passageway and entered the dimly lit room. The first to enter, Demas, the man knew. He was from Thessalonica, where he was a merchant, but more recently he had been a traveling companion. He sometimes served as a messenger to the churches in the surrounding area.

Standing behind Demas was a young man, not as well dressed. It was clear he was not entirely comfortable in the prison, and he kept one eye cautiously on the guard as he stood waiting for Demas to introduce him.

“So, you are back from Colossae,” said the man. “How are the brothers and sisters?”

Prisons

In the Roman world, prisons were usually holding pens for those awaiting trials or punishment rather than facilities for long-term incarceration. Sometimes they were built purposely, but often a section of another building, such as a palace or a barracks, would also serve as a prison. Disused Roman quarries confined prisoners of war and noble citizens who were afforded more freedom of movement. Those in military custody would have been held at an army encampment. Some, like Paul in [Acts 28:16](#), were restricted to a form of house arrest.

While most cities and smaller communities had some type of prison, those built and operated by the state were usually reserved for more violent criminals. Cells were often overcrowded and dark. It was not unusual for inmates to be chained or restricted some other way. Prisoners of high status, such as Roman citizens, were sometimes afforded privileges. These could include not being chained, less restrictive cells, the ability to receive visitors, and food supplies.

In [Acts 16:24](#), Paul and Silas are placed in the innermost cell and their feet placed in stocks. Paul twice uses the Greek

word *desmios* in Philemon, which can mean “chain” but can also mean “prisoner.” The idea of being chained was so closely associated with incarceration that it served as a metonymy (a word used to describe something commonly associated with it) for *prison*.

“Yes, Paul, I’ve been back about three weeks. Many in the Lycus Valley send greetings to you, Timothy, and Luke.” He paused, remembering. “Everyone is asking after Epaphras and his conditions here in prison and hopes you’ll both be released soon.”

By now the other young man was becoming visibly anxious. Demas asked Paul whether it was possible to have a private audience. At the apostle’s request, the guard left the room without further comment, closing the door and leaving the three men alone.

“So, Demas, who is this visitor you’ve brought to me?”

Slavery

Slavery was an accepted fact of Greco-Roman society. Slaves were visible in every aspect of life, and most people probably couldn’t imagine a world without them. While there were varying opinions as to how slaves should be treated, there is little evidence suggesting abolition was ever seriously considered. In spite of their highly visible presence and activity in society, slaves were not part of it. The division between slave and free meant that although a significant part of the population worked to create the benefits of and prosperity for society, they were unable to enjoy them. A slave’s life was lived on the margins, and his or her primary function was to assist and benefit the owner.

“This is Onesimus,” Demas answered. “He is a slave from the household of Philemon.”

“From Philemon’s home!” Paul exclaimed. “What a beloved brother he is! I hear good things about his ministry to the saints in those parts. I hope someday to visit Colossae and minister to the saints in his home.”

Paul put a hand on the slave’s shoulder. “So tell me, do you have a greeting to cheer my soul?”

Onesimus didn’t reply. Instead he stood in awkward silence, his eyes on the floor. Puzzled, the apostle looked at Demas and then back to Onesimus.

“Tell me, young man, how is your master and his wife, Apphia? Are they well? Has something happened to them or to the church in their home?” The lack of response was causing Paul’s own anxiety and

impatience to rise. “Come now, don’t make me wait. What’s wrong?”

Demas cut in. In a low voice, he said, “Philemon and Apphia are fine. It’s Onesimus.” Demas paused again, trying to find the right words while avoiding the apostle’s eyes.

“The fact is,” he finally blurted out, “Onesimus has run away from Philemon. He’s a fugitive.”

Paul took a slow step back. Onesimus, meanwhile, was exhibiting all the symptoms of a man awaiting imminent death. He was a picture of panic, and now the apostle could understand why. A fugitive slave in the middle of a prison, with a guard standing at the door. What on earth was he doing here? It was the last place in the world a fugitive slave would want to be.

“Demas,” Paul asked, “why have you brought a runaway slave to me here? What did you think I would do?”

“I brought him for an interview,” Demas said quietly. “I thought perhaps you could help him.”

“And what kind of help did you think I, a prisoner awaiting trial, could offer to a criminal? Did you think this is the last place the authorities would look for him? In my prison cell?” Paul muttered under his breath for a moment before going on. “Does Tiro know about this? Do you appreciate the consequences if he learns we are harboring a fugitive in his prison? Do you want me to lose my privileges?”

Demas cleared his throat. “We found him wandering in the marketplace here in the city. I recognized Onesimus from my trips to Colossae and assumed he was in the city on business for Philemon. But when I began to speak with him, as you just did, I realized something was wrong. He was agitated and made as if to run away. But Tychicus, who was also there, assured him that if he cooperated, no harm would come to him. So we brought him back to my house.”

Demas paused long enough to gather his thoughts and then continued before Paul could interrupt.

“He refuses to tell us anything other than admitting that he had fled his master’s house. In the end, we decided to bring him to you.”

The Location of Paul’s Imprisonment

In Philemon, Paul identifies himself as a prisoner, but he doesn’t say where he is imprisoned. Rome is the traditional location. Some have argued for Caesarea ([Acts 24:26-27](#)), but few have been convinced. A third option, adopted here, is Ephesus. Possible allusions to an Ephesian imprisonment

may be found in 2 Corinthians, where Paul mentions hardships he experienced in Asia (2 Cor 1:8) and claims to have been imprisoned far more than his opponents (2 Cor 11:23).

More significant is the relationship between Colossians and Philemon. A comparison of the persons listed in Philemon 2, 23-24 with Colossians 4:10-17 reveals that the two letters are closely related. The theology of Colossians might suggest a time later in Paul's life and thus imprisonment in Rome. But assuming Colossae was destroyed by an earthquake (circa AD 60–61), this means that Paul would have written the letters very early in his time in Rome.

However, the close proximity of Ephesus to Colossae (120 miles) means Onesimus could have reached Paul in less than a week. The distance between Colossae and Rome (1,200 miles) would have required a journey of several weeks or even months. Note too Paul's curious request that Philemon prepare a guest room for him (Philem 22). If Paul were in Rome, hoping to visit Spain (Rom 15:28), a trip to Colossae seems less likely. A final piece of evidence to suggest an Ephesian imprisonment is found in the prologue of Marcion (circa AD 85–160) to Colossians, which identifies the place of writing as Ephesus.

In the end, the location of Paul's imprisonment does not affect the interpretation of his letter to Philemon. Paul's imprisonment in Ephesus in this story was chosen for narrative rather than historical reasons.

By now the apostle's temper was beginning to appear. At times like this, he could be cantankerous and was not always so careful with his choice of words. "To me? What am I supposed to do for him? Did you think I don't have enough on my mind? Give me one good reason why I shouldn't call Tiro immediately and have this man arrested."

"Because," Demas answered slowly, "I thought you might be interested to speak with him. It's true he is a fugitive slave, but there is something else that you might be curious to hear."

"Well, out with it, Demas, and quickly, because I am not feeling very patient at the moment," sputtered the apostle.

Demas slowly turned his back to Onesimus and said quietly, "He lives in Philemon's home but is not a believer. He's never attended a meeting of the church. A church that meets in the home of a man known for his generosity. Remember the reports from Epaphras and others about the way churches treat slaves in the Lycus Valley?"

Slowly Demas's words began to penetrate the apostle's angry

demeanor as he remembered what he'd been told in the past.

With a bemused gaze, Paul looked at the slave and asked, "Tell me, Onesimus, do you worship the God of heaven and his son Jesus? Were you not in attendance at the gatherings in Philemon's house?"

Slaves and Religion

There is little by way of direct information about the religious practices of slaves in the first century. Slaves worshiped, like everyone else, a variety of gods. It was assumed that slaves would worship with the family along with everyone else in the household. The presence of slaves at church meetings is evidenced by the way Paul addresses them in his letters ([1 Cor 7:21-22](#); [Eph 6:5-8](#); [Col 3:22-25](#)).

The role of slaves in temples and shrines is well documented, but these are usually slaves owned by the shrine or temple. A significant number of slaves held membership in the various *collegia* (associations), and some held offices alongside free men and freedmen. But they still represented a minority. Moreover, Roman law stipulated that slaves could only be members with their master's consent, and substantial penalties were imposed if they were admitted without it (*Digest* 47.22.3.2). Thus the master controlled all aspects of a slave's life, including the gods whom he or she worshiped.

His surroundings and the conversation were having a visible effect on Onesimus. Beads of sweat had formed on his forehead and were running down his face. He tried to speak, but his throat tightened, constraining any sound from passing through his lips. Demas and Paul rushed to his side, took an arm each, and led him to the bed. After a few moments off his feet and a cup of water, Onesimus was able to reply.



Figure 1.1. Gladiator relief with name “Philemon” inscribed in Greek. From Antioch of Pisidia, a city visited by Paul and Barnabas during Paul’s first missionary journey in [Acts 14:21](#).

“I am not a follower of my master’s religion,” he said. “I am there

when his friends come together, and I help serve their meal. But my master has never required me to worship his god. I am his slave, and I do what I am told to do.”

Even as he said these few words, the strain crept back on his face, and a look of terror returned to his eyes. After a quick, whispered consultation, Demas and Paul agreed that he should lie down and rest while they conferred. They assured him of his safety. They would not inform the guard, and Onesimus would leave the prison the same way he entered it. Somewhat relieved by these promises, Onesimus lay down on the bed. The strain of the last few days had taken a tremendous toll on his body, and he was at the point of exhaustion.

Paul and Demas sat at the table and discussed the situation in hushed voices. It was clear they needed to use extreme caution to get Onesimus out of the prison safely. Any signs of distress would arouse suspicion. They needed a plan—not only to get Onesimus out of prison but to return him to Philemon with as little trouble as possible.

Household Conversions

Early Christianity was a household movement. It sought the conversion of heads of households, whose dependents followed them into the new faith. This pattern is illustrated by the anonymous official ([John 4:53](#)), Cornelius ([Acts 10:2, 24, 44-48](#)), Lydia ([Acts 16:14-15](#)), the Philippian jailer ([Acts 16:31-34](#)), Crispus ([Acts 18:8](#)), and Stephanas ([1 Cor 1:16](#)). In the Greco-Roman world, the concept of the household included not only those related by blood but also slaves. This attitude is reflected in the New Testament household codes, which address not only family members but also slaves ([Eph 5:22–6:9](#); [Col 3:18–4:1](#); [1 Pet 2:18; 3:7](#)). Slaves were considered property owned by their master, but they were also a vital part of the household family. Consequently, the conversion of slaves to Christianity would have been the normal result of their master’s conversion.

“This is troubling,” Paul said more to himself than Demas. “I have seen many people become believers in Jesus. And although I have baptized very few people personally, it was usually the case that the whole household was baptized. Yet, you know that I have heard from Epaphras and others that the churches in the Lycus Valley do not always extend the gospel to everyone living in their household. Onesimus seems to be an example of Philemon neglecting this aspect of his ministry.

“The question now is how to proceed. I would like to speak further

with Onesimus, but we need to be careful for Tiro's sake. We don't want to endanger him or his family. Has he been to your home recently?"

"Yes," Demas said. "But he's careful about it. I'm still concerned that his attendance doesn't entirely stem from a desire to be a follower of Jesus."

"Demas, you are a faithful worker, but your days as a businessman are still guiding the way you view people. Tiro has been a loyal friend since before I was in prison."

"What do you propose we do?" Demas said, still unconvinced.

"Once he regains his composure, take him out just as you came in. Go back to your house so he can rest. Let him meet and associate with the believers, but there's no need to announce that he's a fugitive. I think it would do him good to experience the church here in Ephesus. Once I've had time to speak with Tiro, you can bring him back. I will try to discover why he fled and, if possible, convince him to become a believer. At the very least, we will send him back where he belongs, to Philemon."

"I must object, Paul," Demas said. "I've already taken a substantial risk by keeping him in my house for the last few days and then sneaking him into the prison. Do you realize the danger this will bring on me and my family?"

"Demas, my son, trust me. I know it is a risk, but we must take risks for the gospel every day. My concern is for the church, your family, Onesimus, and his master. I will speak with Tiro. If I can get him to agree to my meeting with Onesimus, I will send word to you. If I can't get him to agree to a meeting, I will at least convince him to give Onesimus more time before we send him back to Philemon."

"And if Tiro doesn't agree? What then? Do I wait until they come to arrest him and me?"

"You must trust me, trust Tiro, but moreover you must trust God. I sense God has more to do with the separation between Philemon and Onesimus than we can yet understand. Now then." The apostle cleared his throat. "Let's wake him up and send you both on your way."

The two men rose from the table and attended to Onesimus. After another drink of water, Paul informed him of their plan to send him back to Demas's home. Onesimus's situation left him little room to argue. Had he known he would be back later in prison again, he would have probably found some way to escape that very night.

After a while, Onesimus was composed enough to leave. His face was still a mask of panic and apprehension, but as long as he didn't look directly at the guard, Paul and Demas hoped that everything would be fine.

LAODICEA

The Report

THE TREMOR HIT SOON AFTER DAWN. It wasn't a particularly intense one, but those in Laodicea who hadn't already been awake certainly were now.

When the second, slightly stronger tremor hit, Nympha reached instinctively for the oil lamp on her bedside table. She didn't want it to hit the floor and make a mess or, worse yet, start a fire. The sun had been steadily climbing in the sky for thirty minutes, and she could easily see around the room without the lamp. She was getting ready to begin her day while the morning air was still cool and before the intense heat of the day began to invade the house.

Earthquakes were a part of life in the Lycus Valley, and although there hadn't been a serious one for some time, the occasional tremors were a reminder of what happens whenever the earth decided to shake.

Once Nympha was confident there would be no more tremors, she decided to get up. She wandered around the house inspecting the different living areas that opened up off the main atrium. There appeared to be little damage. Some items in the *culina*, the kitchen, were strewn about the floor, and a jar of flour had spilled over, but no serious damage was done. The slaves were already beginning to straighten up the house under the guidance of Magnus, the household manager, who would ensure everything returned to normal.

Nympha walked across the atrium toward the two rooms at the front of the house. These served as her *tabernae*, her shops, where she spent much of her time.

Once inside, she inspected the various bowls and containers containing Phrygian stone in various stages of the process required for grinding it into powder. None of the powders had spilled out, but a large quantity of the pumice-like stones had rolled off the tables and

across the floor. Those in need of the compound came to Nympha's house to buy it from her or one of the slaves working in the *taberna*.

Nympha sighed as she picked up the stones and remembered that not long ago Manilus, her husband, would have been cleaning up the *taberna* while she directed the slaves who tended to their home.

Manilus had been trained in the production of eye powder by his father. When his father died, he took over the business. Nympha had worked with Manilus when she had time, and a good business had become a thriving one. Manilus expanded his skills to include other compounds and was among the first to begin processing spikenard for treating ear infections. For the time being the spikenard compound had only been made in Laodicea, which meant that their business grew, and so Manilus and Nympha become fairly wealthy. Eventually they had built a bigger house with space for producing and selling larger quantities of compounds, and they purchased some slaves to help run the household and produce the compounds.

Lycus Valley Earthquakes

One of the most destructive events in Roman times, an earthquake in AD 17 virtually wiped out trade in Asia Minor. Pliny the Elder called it "the greatest earthquake in human memory" (*Natural History* 2.86). Approximately twelve cities were damaged or destroyed, including Ephesus, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Hierapolis. Laodicea is not mentioned, but its location directly across the Lycus Valley from Hierapolis suggests it was also affected. The quake was of such economic magnitude that the Roman emperor at the time, Tiberius, sent aid equaling at least ten million sesterces to Sardis alone to help with problems related to the quake. Rome gave all cities affected by the quake a five-year tax holiday to help spur economic recovery. Another quake struck the region in AD 23, which affected both Ephesus and Pergamon. A subsequent, sizable quake struck in AD 60 that destroyed both Laodicea and Colossae. Laodicea rebuilt, without imperial assistance, while Colossae never recovered fully. (John McRay, *Archaeology of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990], 262)



Figure 2.1. Lycus Valley and surrounding cities.

When Manilus had died last year, Nympha became a wealthy widow in possession of a business. With the help of the more skilled slaves, she continued grinding the stones and selling the powders. She sometimes wondered whether Manilus might have lived had he been prayed for by members of the church or perhaps touched by one of the healing cloths that came from Ephesus.

Medicine in Laodicea

In addition to its black wool, Laodicea was known for the medical treatments developed in the local Herophilian school. Phrygian stones were ground into a powder and applied to patients suffering from various types of eye infections. See [Revelation 3:18](#), where Jesus offers to sell the Laodiceans ointment for their eyes so that they might see. This is most likely an allusion to the production of Phrygian stone powders at Laodicea.

Galen, a well-known second-century physician who studied and practiced at the Asclepium in Pergamum, says that for a while spikenard ointment was only available in Laodicea but had become widely available by his time (*Methods of Medicine* 11.16).

The thought of the church brought her back to reality. There would be a gathering of local believers later that day! She would need to be sure Magnus ordered the house and the *triclinium*, the dining room table, prepared for the meeting and the meal that would follow.

Woman in the Greco-Roman World

Women in the Roman world were in many ways second-class citizens and in some cases no better than slaves. However, just as social and legal customs varied from region to region, so also did the roles, status, and liberties of women. The greatest difference between women in the Greco-Roman world was not cultural, ethnic, or religious but economic.

Women were usually attached to a male patron beginning with their father and then moving to a husband or a son or guardian should their husband die. Women worked at many of the same jobs as men. They labored in fields, took care of livestock, and helped run the family shop. They were involved in running the household, including overseeing slaves. Women were permitted to participate in the theater and other forms of the arts. Upper-class women could learn to read. Some women even joined the gladiatorial games and other forms of blood sport.

In the first century it was normally men, not women, who ran the business, while women ran the household. However, there were women who were successful in business, as was Lydia of Thyatira, who was a seller of purple cloth and eventually expanded to Philippi of Macedonia, where she met the apostle Paul and was converted to Christianity ([Acts 16:13-15](#)).

Nympha had become a Christian soon after Manilus died. Her brother, Epaphras, was a local Christian leader and had spoken to them many times about Jesus. Manilus had been impressed by Jesus and the things he had said. He also hadn't objected to worshiping the god of Israel and would have readily participated if Epaphras hadn't insisted that they also cease worshiping all other gods. This, Manilus had insisted, was too much to ask. With a thriving business in medicinal compounds, it would have been economic suicide to stop frequenting the numerous shrines and temples in Laodicea. If the other sellers of Phrygian stone and spikenard had discovered Manilus and Nympha's new religious habits—and it would not have taken long—rumors would have spread quickly that they were Jewish or atheists. This would have given his competition an excuse to limit or cut off the supply of Phrygian stones, which would have made it hard for him to stay in business. It would only have been a matter of time, then, before patients would have stopped coming to their *taberna* to

buy the compounds.

It was Manilus's death that finally convinced Nympha that the gods weren't as powerful as some claimed. Her brother continued speaking to her about what the God of Israel did through Jesus, and reports about the healing cloths from Ephesus began to convince her. When one of the cloths healed her cousin, she knew Manilus was wrong.

When she began worshiping with the church in Laodicea, Nympha was happy to attend the meetings held in the homes of the various believers. In the earliest days, the group sometimes gathered in *insulae*, the simple flats occupied by the poorest of the city. These houses weren't as large and luxurious as her own house. But now the church members numbered about forty and required a place that could hold all of them together.



Figure 2.2. An insula dating from the early second century AD in the Roman port town of Ostia Antica.

Some in Laodicea probably looked down on her because these gatherings were socially mixed occasions. Householders like her attended the meeting with spouses and children. Other “friends” were there as well. These were the various clients for whom wealthier, more powerful individuals acted as patron. There were also a number of tradesmen who didn't own a business but found work as it came available. Some from the local Jewish population were also followers

of Jesus, though they were fewer in number. There was even a small number of homeless people who attended and sometimes stayed in the host home between meetings.

Patron-Client Relationship

In the Greco-Roman world there was a social arrangement by which those of inferior status and financial means could attach themselves to those more influential and well-to-do. By doing this, clients hoped to advance themselves in society by riding on the coattails of the patron. It was a relationship of exchange. The client received from the patron what he needed and provided some type of return favor or service. Often, the client would receive tangible goods (money, home, goods) and would repay with intangible goods such as promoting the name of the patron or supporting them in a political process or as an informant. It was usually an exclusive relationship, binding a client to one patron to the exclusions of other patrons. In theory the patron-client relationship was a voluntary one, but it may not have always worked this way in a practical sense. Usually, a client approached the patron out of need. So while the client may have made the choice to attach himself to the patron, it was usually a difficult situation that forced him into that choice.

Nympha hadn't planned to host the church in her home. But the imprisonment of Epaphras brought about an unexpected change. Her brother was the founder of the Lycus Valley churches and responsible for appointing leaders in Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea. One of these was Archippus. He was a leader but not the host of the church. For several months the church was hosted by Adrastus. But when Epaphras had been arrested, Adrastus decided he no longer wanted to be a part of the church. Several members suspected that his real interest in the meetings was to attract more clients to himself and weren't completely surprised when he stopped hosting and attending the meetings.

Nympha's business continued to thrive, in spite of her new social associations. It seemed the need for medical compounds outweighed any scruples people had about her religious practices. Manilus was wrong on both accounts. Not only was the God of Israel greater than the Roman gods, but he also proved to be a more powerful protector.

Yet, she was distraught. It had been hard losing Manilus and trying to keep their business running and support the household. But her brother Epaphras had supported her emotionally, and when his work

with the churches allowed he had worked in the *tabernae* grinding and selling compounds. His imprisonment and the uncertainty about his future made her feel like giving up. It was hard enough being a woman in Roman society, let alone a widow, and running a business. So she was taken aback when Archippus suggested that she begin hosting the church in her home.

She initially refused, but he was able to persuade her. The group needed a home large enough to meet, and as Epaphras's sister she knew as much about the churches in the valley as Archippus. There were days when it added strain to the normal rhythms of the household, and she suspected Magnus and the other slaves sometimes resented the presence of the group in the home. But in the end, Nympha found that it helped her to think less about Manilus and to worry less about Epaphras. The group prayed together often, and some members stopped by to talk with her during the week or even to lend a hand in the *tabernae*. She found that although her problems didn't disappear, she was more at peace in herself.



Nympha wasn't surprised when Archippus arrived at her home later that morning. The group wouldn't gather until evening, when the day's work was done, but Archippus sometimes arrived early to talk or pray with her. Although a frequent guest in the home, Archippus didn't always feel welcome by Magnus. Thus Nympha found him waiting like a stranger in the *vestibulum*, the long, narrow entrance hall that led from the street.

"I am sorry Magnus didn't bring you into the atrium," she apologized. "I will speak to him about showing you more respect."

"It's fine," he replied. "I suspect he blames me for the chaos the church has added to your household."

"Perhaps, but that's no excuse for him forgetting his place."

They walked through the atrium together to the *peristylum*. The colonnaded garden was a haven of peace away from the busy street and steady stream of people coming to buy ointments and powders. The area had a variety of trees and flowering bushes planted in it, and a fountain in the center. The sound of running water helped drown out the noise from the street and was a favorite place for Archippus to retreat. He often spent time here praying or reading stories about Jesus on a papyrus roll. Nympha's *peristylum* was the perfect place to prepare for whatever he might say to the church later that day.

Sitting down next to her on one of the benches, Archippus asked, "What news have you heard from the other churches in the valley?"

Nympha related how someone from Hierapolis had come to buy some powders and reported that the church there was growing in

more ways than one. Not only were people becoming followers of Jesus and joining the church, but also current members were adding to their numbers through birth. Last week the church in Hierapolis had celebrated the birth of a baby boy named Papias. “It’s exciting to see how God is adding to our numbers,” she said. “Hierapolis now has a member of the church who was born to Christian parents. Who knows what God may yet have in store for this young baby and the church in that city?”

Papias of Hierapolis

Hierapolis was located about nine miles across the valley from Laodicea. It is mentioned once in the New Testament, in [Colossians 4:13](#). Later tradition holds that it became the home of Phillip the evangelist and his four daughters. A church was built there to mark Philip’s tomb.

Papias was born in Hierapolis in the mid-to-late first century and later became bishop there. Irenaeus describes him as “an ancient man who was a hearer of John and a companion of Polycarp” (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 5.33). Papias is credited with recording the sayings of Jesus in a document that was passed around among the churches of Asia Minor. His exact year of birth is unknown, but many assume a date around AD 69. For the purposes of the story I have moved up his birth by ten or so years.

The conversation turned to the Laodicean church, in particular a couple who had started attending recently. “They are very poor and need food. I’ve invited them to stay with me for a few weeks so the husband can learn about making powders and ointments. If he does well, perhaps he can find work. At the same time, I will arrange for a teacher to provide some education for their children.” Archippus paused briefly. “What about Colossae? What do you hear from the church there?”

“I’ve not heard anything for several weeks,” she replied. “This is a busy time for them. I suspect they are trying to finish dying this year’s wool. Cousin Philemon is dedicated to the church and the saints in the area. But he is also dedicated to making money,” she added with a chuckle. “But I suppose he wouldn’t be so generous to the church if he weren’t making money.”

“Well,” Archippus said, “unfortunately, not all is well in your cousin’s household, Nympha. I returned from there yesterday. Epaphras asked that I stop in now and then to check on the Colossian church. He’s concerned about some of the teachings and practices that

are happening there. While I was visiting Philemon, one of his slaves fled from the home and took a large quantity of money with him. Your cousin was, needless to say, quite upset over the whole situation.”

“Which slave was it?” Nympha asked.

“Onesimus. Do you know him?”

“No, can’t say that I do. Is he a new slave?”

“No,” replied Archippus. “In fact, he’s been there for some time. He seems to have a rather poor reputation, however. Apparently, he didn’t live up to his name and could be rather lazy. You probably never met him because he was doing his best to avoid work.”

“Do you know how much he stole?” she asked.

“No, but it must have been quite a lot,” said Archippus. “Your cousin is trying to complete this season’s order of dyed wool for delivery to a ship waiting in Ephesus. The money Onesimus took has caused him some financial strain. He’s been forced to divert money from his household accounts to pay for dyeing the wool.”

“And how is my cousin reacting?” Nympha asked.

“He is being his old self,” Archippus replied. “There’s no doubt he’s changed since his conversion, but his kindness and love don’t extend to everyone, especially his slaves. His wealth comes at a cost, often on the backs of his slaves.”

“Yes. I remember hearing how he once beat a slave severely for spilling some dye.”

“Indeed,” answered Archippus, “there are some who wonder whether Philemon’s generous gifts and support are the result of his love for God or a desire to attain honor among the more prominent Christian citizens. I, for one, think his generosity is real and comes from God. But I can understand how his outbursts of cruelty can make someone wonder. In any case, I thought you should know what is happening there, since your interests in Colossae are connected to both the church and your family.” Archippus got up. “I have another errand to run. But I’ll be back later to pray here before the others arrive for the evening meeting.”

They crossed the atrium together. As Archippus was about to step out the door, he turned to Nympha and said, “The one thing about Philemon that I always found curious is the way he treats his slaves compared with those in the church. He doesn’t let his slaves participate in the meeting and the fellowship meal. Nor does he let the slaves of the other church members eat in the same room as their masters. I am reminded of what Paul teaches, ‘In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one.’ I sometimes wonder whether Philemon ever heard Paul say that.”

Nympha puzzled over this as Archippus turned and entered the street without waiting for a reply. As she closed the door, she saw Magnus watching her from the atrium. She wondered whether Magnus had heard what Archippus had said. She wondered why Archippus had said it to her.

EPHESUS

Paul in Prison

THE KNOCK ON THE DOOR was not unexpected this time. With a simple acknowledgment by the prisoner, the door opened and revealed Tiro, the prison manager. Paul was sitting at the table, once again studying papyri.

“You asked to speak with me?” Tiro said.

“Yes I did, Tiro. Please come sit down.”

Paul had decided the best approach to the situation was to demonstrate his gratitude to the prison manager and to pay honor to him. So, standing in front of the prison manager, he began the conversation by saying, “I want to thank you again for the many liberties you allow me to enjoy in this prison cell. While the circumstances are not of my choosing, I am grateful for the freedom I have to continue my work with the churches, even if from behind the locked door you control.”

“It’s the least I can do for you, especially after the way that you looked after my son,” Tiro responded.

“Yes, well, I happened to be at the right place at the right time. I suppose a few seconds later and he would have been seriously injured.”

Nearly a year ago, Paul had been walking through the streets of Ephesus on his way to the school of Tyrannus, located among the gymnasia in the harbor district. The way to the school took him through the Tetragonos *agora*. The city that day was calm, almost serene. The only activity was of merchants making money. Paul passed people buying and selling while others, like himself, were using the agora as a convenient shortcut. At that time of the morning it was not unusual to see groups of men heading in the direction of the harbor gymnasium and baths.

Ephesus

Ephesus was an intersection for commerce and Roman administration. When Augustus became emperor, he made Ephesus the capital of proconsular Asia, which covered the western part of Asia Minor. He also gave the city the title "First and Greatest Metropolis of Asia," which solidified the city's reputation as an important administrative center for the empire. The streets were repaved, aqueducts were built, and the city was filled with triumphal monuments honoring the emperor's relatives and allies. The city benefited from Romanization in ways that caused it quickly to eclipse Pergamum, which had previously been the region's most important city.

As a port city located on the Aegean Sea, Ephesus attracted any number of transients. Sailors were there in abundance to trade their goods with local merchants and to find a distraction from their time at sea. If it was entertainment they wanted, Ephesus boasted a twenty-five-thousand-seat theater in which dramas could be performed. Moreover, there were four aqueducts that continuously supplied the city with water, which in turn filled the numerous bath complexes that were available for locals, religious tourists, and weary travelers. There were also two main *agoras*, or marketplaces, including the Tetragonon agora. It was located adjacent to the harbor and the commercial center of the city. As such, it was an ideal spot to catch up on the local news, interact with itinerant philosophers, and observe the religious tourists who came to worship at the temple of Artemis.

One constant problem in Ephesus, however, was that the city's geography was subtly and slowly changing. The River Cayster flowed into the harbor, and with its unstoppable flow came a steady supply of debris carried from hundreds of miles away and deposited into the waiting harbor. The harbor was constantly in danger of being filled with silt. In spite of attempts to dredge the silt away, there were many who feared that the harbor would eventually move farther away and leave the ships and docks of Ephesus pitched up on dry land. Such a prospect was not impossible. Almost three hundred years before, the people of Ephesus had moved their city from its old location. The marshes created by the silt from the River Cayster were the cause of malaria and many deaths among the inhabitants. They had eventually been forced to move to the city's present location when the king flooded the old city by

blocking the sewers (Strabo, *Geography* 14.1.24).

The apostle noticed a young boy wandering rather aimlessly through the market, seeming to enjoy the sights and smells of the early morning commerce. The boy was walking along the edges of the agora, peering into the various shops and gazing with curiosity at various items.

Suddenly, something caught the boy's attention across the agora at one of the shops on the north side. Overpowered by curiosity and unaware of his surroundings, he began to walk into the middle of the agora. He did not see the horse pulling a large quantity of Colossian wool. Had it not been for the quick hands of the apostle, the boy would have been crushed.

The boy, shaken from his curiosity-induced trance, looked up to see who had seized him. Seeing the apostle, and oblivious to his brush with danger, he yelled and tried to pull away from Paul back into the direction of the carts. As the two struggled, a shrill voice cried out from behind them. The boy suddenly went limp. The voice cried out again, but this time the words were perceptible. "Appius, come over here."

The voice belonged to the boy's mother. She thanked Paul and explained that, although a good boy, he was constantly wandering off in the crowded streets and markets. She feared his wanderlust would one day lead to injury. She tried to reward Paul, but the apostle refused and was only too happy to be on his way.

A few days later a visitor arrived to hear Paul preaching. The man was Tiro, and he was accompanied by his wife, Myrto, the mother of the boy Paul had saved from being trampled. Tiro approached Paul and explained that after he had left his wife and son the other day, Appius had again escaped his mother and followed the apostle to the school of Tyrannus. When Tiro and Myrto learned where Paul was teaching, they decided to try once more to reward him. But now that they had heard what Paul was teaching, they had many questions. Over the course of the next weeks, Tiro continued to attend Paul's lectures. Eventually Tiro, Myrto, and Appius were all baptized and began meeting with the church at Demas's home.

Temple of Artemis

One thing that everyone who visited the city wanted to see was the Temple of Artemis. The temple was well known throughout the Roman Empire and was declared by Herodotus to be one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Religious tourists would travel to Ephesus to see its temples and

worship there. The temple Paul would have seen was not the original. An earlier temple had been destroyed by arson, carried out by a fame seeker named Herostratus. The Ephesian residents were so angered by this senseless, destructive act that they refused to speak his name ever again. A legend relates that on the very same night that the temple was burned, Alexander the Great was born. The story describes Artemis as preoccupied with Alexander's birth and unable to save her burning temple. Perhaps aware of the legend, Alexander later offered to pay for its rebuilding, but the Ephesians refused. The temple was eventually restored after Alexander's death. When the Romans arrived, they called Artemis by the name Diana, which was the name of one of their own goddesses. But no matter whether she was called Artemis or Diana, she was known to all as the Lady of Ephesus, and her temple was one of the largest worship sites in the empire.



Figure 3.1. Artemis was depicted in different ways throughout the Greco-

Roman world. In Ephesus she was worshiped as a mother goddess and depicted with multiple protrusions that have been interpreted in a variety of ways including breasts, eggs, grapes, acorns, and bull testes.

Paul's relationship with Tiro proved to be a blessing when later, while he was preaching, a riot broke out. Demetrius, a local a silversmith, made a handsome profit selling souvenir replicas of Artemis to religious tourists. Paul's preaching about the Jewish "Son of God" who had been raised from the dead was attracting attention. This in itself would not have been a problem, since the average citizen and religious tourist in Ephesus worshiped any number of gods. But Paul's message was not merely about another god. It included the claim that the Jewish God was the only true god and that Artemis and all the other gods of the empire were in fact not gods at all.

When Demetrius realized that his livelihood was being threatened, he organized a meeting of tradesmen in the agora. The tradesmen, all with families to feed and taxes to pay, immediately saw the sense in Demetrius's concern and decided to organize a protest.

The tradesmen entered the center of the agora chanting "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians" over and over again, working themselves and those around them almost into an ecstatic frenzy. The response was more than they could have hoped for. Some misunderstood that someone was threatening the very structure of Artemis's temple, others that it was the Romans who were threatening the temple. The whiff of protest and chaos was too much for some to resist. Those who made it a habit of complaining about Roman rule or corrupt local officials took up the chant, but not in defense of the temple. They chanted for the city of Ephesus and the pride they felt for it. Still others did not know what was happening and were swept up by the mass of people moving through the agora toward the theater, depositing them there like silt in the harbor from the River Cayster. Some chanted along with the tradesmen, while others shouted political slogans, while many others walked around wondering about the cause for such a demonstration. For two hours this continued until the town clerk was able to quiet the crowd and convince them to disperse before they were forced to answer for this illegal assembly.

Demetrius and his allies saw that their organized protest had come close to disaster, but it also had the desired effect. Taking the town clerk's advice, they brought charges against Paul and his followers. At first the members of the court were unwilling to act. After all, there was no real threat to Artemis's temple.

But Demetrius was undeterred and presented several witnesses. The first group spoke about supposed miracles Paul had performed. The sick were healed through his personal touch or by pieces of cloth

he had touched. But the magistrates remained unconvinced, since the practice of magic was well supported in the city. However, their reply was the opening that Demetrius had been hoping for. He immediately pushed forward a second group of witnesses, who explained that even the practice of magic was being hindered. Paul's influence had grown to such a degree that a large number of citizens recently burned copies of magical spells, worth fifty thousand drachmas!

It was the last charge that gained the magistrates' attention. The average daily wage for a skilled worker was one drachma. The magistrates realized that this new religion was a financial threat to the city of Ephesus and ordered that Paul be arrested for inciting riots. When the soldiers arrested him in the agora, he was accompanied by Epaphras, and both were taken to prison.

During the silversmith riot it was Tiro who brought Paul a message warning him not to enter the theater and attempt to address the crowd. And it was by God's grace that when Paul was arrested, he ended up in Tiro's prison. Paul's relationship with Tiro and his status as a Roman citizen were what helped him receive better treatment than most prisoners, including Epaphras, who was located deeper in the prison.

Now the two men sat together, talking in Paul's cell, as they had several times since his arrest. Continuing his strategy of honoring Tiro, Paul asked a question to which he already knew the answer.

"Remind me, Tiro, how did you come to be the director of this prison?"

"As you well know, Paul, I had already worked in the prison for more than ten years. When the former director retired, I was selected to replace him."

"So you were a public slave then?" Paul asked.

Tiro seemed to wince involuntarily when Paul mentioned the word *slave* but recovered quickly.

"Yes, like most prison guards, I was owned by the city of Ephesus. I worked various jobs, but when it was discovered I could read I was sent to assist the prison manager. When he retired I was granted my freedom and made manager."

"Were you born a slave?"

Public Slaves

A public slave (*servi publici*) was owned by the state or a local municipality rather than a private individual. These slaves worked as laborers, building roads, bridges, and sewers, or in public buildings, such as temples, baths, and prisons. The Roman aqueducts, for instance, required more than seven

hundred public slaves in order to maintain the system.

Some public slaves were educated and highly accomplished and could be found working skilled jobs such as architects, accountants, and personal secretaries. Some were employed as teachers to educate younger Roman citizens. Because of their position and skills, some public slaves were able to earn both reputation and influence.

During the Roman Republic, public slaves could be freed by a magistrate's declaration, with authorization of the senate. In the imperial era, freedom was approved by the emperor. Public slaves in local municipalities were freed by the local council.

"No, I was born free," Tiro replied with a clear mixture of pride and regret. "I was the son of a local merchant. We lived comfortably here in Ephesus. My father owned a home and a few slaves, one of whom taught me to read."

"So how did you end up a slave?"

Tiro sighed. "My father was not a wise manager of his household. His pursuit of wealth and greater status landed him in debt. When his debts became greater than his wealth and status, he decided to sell me and my sister to pay his creditors. He already had two older sons and thus no need for a third. And he had even less need for a daughter, who would only end up costing him the price of a dowry someday. I haven't seen her in more than twenty years. I'm not sure whether she is alive or dead."

"And yet here you are, a freedman living in a wealthy city serving as the master of those with whom you were once enslaved," observed Paul.

"I was fortunate, I suppose. Unlike my sister, I was able to stay in Ephesus, and although I would have preferred serving in the home of a wealthy individual, fate seems to have put me on a more prosperous path. While becoming a public slave was not my choice, I was able to move up within the prison and gain my freedom. Now, as you know, I am married to someone who is also a former slave, and together we hope to help Appius to escape the stigma of slavery."

"You have much to be thankful for, my friend," Paul said. "You understand the difference between slavery and freedom in a way that many do not. I suspect that your new life in Christ has helped you to appreciate freedom from a variety of types of slavery, including from that of sin."

The two sat in silence for a few moments together until Paul decided it was time to broach the subject of Onesimus.

"I have a matter on which I need your advice, Tiro."

“Tell me, and I will see how I can help.” Tiro’s answer suggested he’d been expecting Paul to ask him some favor.

“Demas recently brought me a visitor from the Lycus Valley, from the household of Philemon in Colossae.”

“He is another believer?” Tiro asked.

“No, but he is from Philemon’s household.”

Upwardly Mobile Slaves

For some slaves in the Roman Empire, becoming free could mean acquiring social and economic advantages. Slaves owned by Roman citizens could, under certain requirements, become citizens themselves upon being emancipated. Former slaves who remained attached to their master’s house received economic and political boosts not normally available to poor free persons. Former slaves may have learned a skill that enabled them to open a business, and some entered freedom with money earned while serving as a slave.

Success after slavery sometimes led to excessive boasting through gratuitous public displays of their wealth and the erection of monuments in their own honor. In Roman Corinth, for instance, some inscriptions proudly declare the former slave status of the erector. Gnaeus Babbius Philinus erected two such monuments at his own expense. C. Julius Laco and his son Spartiacus, direct descendants of the freedman C. Julius Eurycles, one of Corinth’s greatest benefactors, dedicated inscriptions to themselves. Another is found on a paving stone dedicated by the freedman Erastus, who may or may not be the same person mentioned in [Romans 16:23](#). Second-century city patron C. Cornelius Pulcher, a descendant of freedmen, preserved his name no less than eleven times. These monuments are examples of self-promotion, but they also reveal how some former slaves and their descendants climbed the social ladder and become great benefactors to their communities.

“What does he need? Money? A place to stay?”

“No, I simply need some advice, since your past provides you with a unique perspective,” Paul said.

At this last statement, a somewhat bemused expression arose on Tiro’s face. “How exactly can my past help this individual?”

“Onesimus is a slave owned by Philemon, and the two have become—how shall I put it—separated from each other.”

“Separated in what way?” Tiro asked, now looking anxious.

“I haven’t asked for details,” Paul explained. “But something has happened that caused Onesimus’s absence. More important at the moment, however, is for me to learn what options lay before us in this situation.”

“Options?” retorted Tiro. “If I understand your vague description of his ‘separation’ from Philemon correctly, then the only option is to alert the local authorities immediately.”

“Yes, I am aware that reporting him is one option, Tiro,” Paul said. “But I wonder whether there might be another way for us to respond.”

“And how would there be any other option?” Tiro asked, incredulous.

“Because you were sold into slavery as a child, yet now you are a freedman with authority over many slaves. You know what it is like to long for freedom and fight the urge to flee. You also understand the importance of helping a master get back his property. So you should understand both sides of this story. And since Onesimus is here among Philemon’s friends, shouldn’t we do what we can to bring about reconciliation quickly?”

Tiro knew he was painted in a corner. Paul hadn’t asked about his personal history to hear a repeat of the well-known story. Rather, he wanted Tiro to remember his own story as he considered that of Onesimus. The only thing that made the whole situation slightly bearable was Paul’s intention to send Onesimus home. He only hoped that Philemon wouldn’t report them once the whole story was known.

“I will speak to those among the magistrates whom I know,” Tiro said, resigned. “They were willing to help in the past. Perhaps they can offer the kind of advice that keeps you from getting into further trouble.”

“I appreciate your willingness to help,” Paul said with a smile.

Tiro got up and headed for the door. As he was about to exit, Paul said, “Oh, Tiro, one other thing.”

“Yes?”

“Since I am unable to leave the prison, it will be necessary for Onesimus to visit me here from time to time. Would you mind letting the guards know?”

Tiro couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Paul wanted to bring a fugitive slave into his prison? He was ready to refuse but realized it was of no use. Paul would find some way to back him into another corner. Besides, Tiro thought shrewdly, if he decided to have the slave arrested, it would be easier to do it in a prison cell than somewhere out in the city.

“All right, but don’t bring him here too many times,” a frustrated Tiro responded.

COLOSSAE

The Flight

THE AIR OF THE WORKSHOP WAS HEAVY with dampness and stench. Those who worked here on a regular basis were accustomed to the smell, but those not familiar with the process of wool dyeing often found themselves gagging.

In a corner a slave was stirring a vat filled with dark liquid and a large quantity of wool boiling over a fire. The dark-colored liquid derived from a combination of water and crushed madder root. The resulting color from the concoction was a reddish purple known widely as *colossinum*, named after the city of its origin, Colossae.

The slave paused, raising his mixing paddle to inspect the wool. The level of the liquid in the vat had decreased, signaling that the wool had absorbed a sufficient quantity of dye. The slave then moved the wool, heavy and dripping with dye, to another vat filled with water, where he rinsed it before placing it on one of the drying mats. Once he completed the task, he started over again with another quantity of wool. All of this happened under the watchful eye of Calmus, the dye-works overseer.

Calmus had been working in Philemon's dye works since he was ten years old. He learned the trade from his father, a slave owned by Philemon's father. When the elder Philemon died, the son had inherited the business along with Calmus and other slaves. The younger Philemon proved to be an astute businessman and increased the dye works' profitability by selling his wool outside the Lycus Valley. While many of the valley's dyers took their goods to the Cloth Hall in Laodicea, Philemon took his wool directly to Ephesus, where he had access to more buyers and didn't have to contend with the middlemen in Laodicea, who wanted their cut of the profits. As a result, Philemon was regularly away from home for long periods of time. This meant Calmus was often left in charge of the workshop.

Wool Production in the Lycus Valley

Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis were all known for their wool production. More than one hundred years before our story is set, Colossae was a flourishing commercial center located on a major trade route in the Lycus Valley. But by the time of our story, Colossae had been eclipsed by the larger, more thriving cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Laodicea sold raven-black wool it sheared from its sheep. It also hosted the Cloth Hall, which served as a central market for dyers and other textile producers. Colossae and Hierapolis, on the other hand, both made reddish-purple wool using madder root. While the quality of wool in both cities was better than that from Miletus, Hierapolis held an advantage over Colossae because its wool was brighter and fade resistant.

The secret to Hierapolis's success was the hot springs located around the city. The springs gushed out steaming-hot water that cascaded over the side of the mountain, leaving white calcium salt deposits in its wake. While some claimed the hot springs provided medicinal qualities, local dyers discovered that the calcium salts were an excellent mordant. Wool treated with the salts prior to being placed in the dye vat absorbed the dye more efficiently and resulted in a more permanent color fastness. Colossae, on the other hand, did not have a natural hot spring nearby. This meant that dyers had to use other mordants to help the dye penetrate the wool. The most common and by far cheapest mordant was urine.



Figure 4.1. Located in the Turkish city of Pamukkale (Turkish for “cotton castle”) the hot springs were once part of Ancient Hierapolis. A modern tourist attraction/health spa, the calcium-rich springs have long been appreciated for their healing properties and recreation benefits.

One of the slaves working nearby was pretreating wool by rubbing it with urine before dipping it in the dye vat. He raised his head as Calmus walked past.

“Any news yet?”

“No, nothing yet,” Calmus replied. “I suspect it’ll be a few days.”

The other slave nodded in agreement and said, “I never expected he would be the one to run away. He was so lazy I didn’t think he had the energy to run.”

“He was never lazy,” Calmus corrected him. “Had he set his mind to it, he could have been very successful and perhaps even won his freedom someday. No, actually Onesimus is very intelligent. His slow work pace and frequent accidents are really evidence of someone who knows exactly what he is doing.”

Resistance to Slavery

The act of physically removing oneself from the control of one’s master was one of the most common forms of resistance. But slaves found numerous other ways to resist their situation. In 73 BC, Spartacus led a rebellion of seventy slaves at a gladiator school in Capua. For two years an army consisting of thousands of slaves wandered around Italy, battling and defeating Roman legionary forces and even

threatening the city of Rome itself. Spartacus was defeated, and while there were other smaller rebellions, none reached the same level of violence and success. Nonetheless, memories of the rebellion stoked an underlying fear of slaves among their owners.

Apart from outright rebellion, slaves were known to lie, cheat, steal, and sabotage. In his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder complains about the pilfering habits of slaves (33.6). And when writing on agriculture in the Roman Empire, Columella lists the types of damage a slave could cause, including claiming to have sown more seed than was the case, failing to care properly for the crops, falsifying records, selling portions of the harvest, and hiring out oxen without permission (1.7.6-7).

More subtle forms of resistance included truancy and feigning sickness. Slave owners complained about how slaves sometimes worked at a deliberately slow pace, roamed aimlessly, wasted time, and returned home late. Other slaves claimed illness or injury as a way to escape work for a day or even an extended period.

Slaves sometimes concluded that the only way to permanently end their misery was through suicide. Precise records of how many attempted to take their own lives do not exist. But it was a serious enough problem that the jurists ruled that the sale of a slave could be canceled if the slave had attempted or was prone to self-destruction (*Digest* 21.1.1; 21.1.23.3).

In addition to violence against themselves, some slaves assaulted or murdered their masters. While there are few recorded instances of this, it was probably more common than the evidence reflects. In one ruling, Roman jurist Callistratus comments that slaves who conspire against the safety of their masters are usually burned alive (*Digest* 48.19.28.11). Tacitus records how the senate decreed that when a slave kills his master he must be executed along with any other slaves who were in the house at the time. It was assumed that these slaves were accomplices and did nothing to stop the crime (33.30). When a prefect was murdered by his slave in AD 61 and plans to execute all of the household slaves were made public, a riot broke out, and the senate house was surrounded. The end result was that Emperor Nero had to line the streets with armed soldiers in order to carry out the executions in spite of the protest against slaughtering the innocent (34.44). This scene suggests that violence against masters was feared to

such a degree that extreme penalties were meant to serve as a deterrent.

"I suppose," the other slave replied. "But why steal too? The master will always search for a runaway, even a lazy one, but especially one who is a thief."

Calmus didn't have an answer and began to move on. As he turned away he noticed the figure of Apphia standing in the doorway. He bowed his head respectfully and said, "I am sorry, mistress, I didn't know you were standing there."

"It's all right, Calmus, I was stopping to see how things are going and was intrigued to hear your opinion about Onesimus."

"You overheard, then?" Calmus asked.

"Yes, and no need to worry. Your master and I have full confidence in you. We don't fear an uprising in our own home. In truth, we are all concerned over the situation and what the future will hold."

"So you haven't heard anything?" Calmus inquired.

"No, Philemon hasn't returned home yet."

"I am sorry. I know this has created a great burden for you, the master, and the household."

"Thank you, Calmus," Apphia replied. "Things have been stressful enough with the arrest of Epaphras and Paul. Normally, the disappearance of a household slave would be enough, but in this case it has only added to the situation."

"Again, I am sorry. Mistress, is there anything I can do to help until Onesimus is found?"

"Yes, that is the other reason why I have come. In spite of all that has happened, the church will still be meeting here tomorrow evening. Onesimus's disappearance means one less set of hands to prepare for their arrival and to serve the meal. I would like for you to send someone from the dye works to help out."

"I will do that, mistress," replied Calmus. "When would you like me to send him?"

"Tomorrow afternoon will be soon enough," Apphia answered. "While Onesimus provided an extra set of hands, they weren't always the most useful hands in the house."

As Apphia returned to the house, Calmus reflected more on the situation. His master had been hosting a meeting of a local religious group for a little more than a year now. The group were all followers of a man named Jesus who had apparently died and became a god. Philemon was very devoted to the members of the group, or the "church," as they referred to themselves. He and Apphia opened their home on a regular basis, but they weren't in charge of the meetings. Since the beginning, Philemon's cousin Epaphras would travel down

the valley from Laodicea to meet with the believers and teach them about Jesus. But since his arrest in Ephesus, Archippus had taken his place.

Philemon had not always been a Christian. Like Manilus, he was a prosperous businessman who had been happy to worship many gods. Epaphras had spoken to him many times about the God of Israel and his son, Jesus, but to no avail. Once, when Epaphras taught in Hierapolis, he asked Philemon to accompany him to a meeting when he was in town on business. Philemon attended the meeting out of respect for his cousin, but he remained unmoved. It was only when near tragedy struck that he finally became a Christian.

Philemon had traveled to Ephesus to sell a load of *colossinum*. During this trip he had first met Paul. Epaphras was already in Ephesus and convinced Philemon to accompany him to the school of Tyrannus to hear Paul speak. Philemon was reluctant since it was his normal practice to visit the shrine of Artemis while in the city. The shrine was not only one of the most important religious sites in the world, it was a good place to meet potential customers. But Epaphras persisted. Paul spoke for about an hour, and Philemon found it to be much the same as he'd heard from Epaphras. At the end of the meeting, Epaphras wanted to introduce the two, but Philemon was anxious to make his way to the shrine and from there the agora, where he planned to meet some wool buyers from Gaul.

But he never made it to the shrine. As he walked through the city, he felt a wave of nausea spreading over his body. By the time he reached the agora he was doubled over in pain and vomiting. He sat down with his head between his knees wondering what to do next. By the grace of God, Epaphras was walking through the agora and saw Philemon. He helped his cousin to his feet and led him to the home of a local Christian named Demas.

Philemon lingered for several days, running a fever and unable to eat. He slept often, and when he was awake he wondered whether he would recover. There was someone in the room named Luke attending to his needs, but it was clear that all the medical ministrations were doing little to help. Philemon wondered why no one went and brought him a healer from the Asclepion.

Around noon on the fifth day, Epaphras entered the room carrying a cloth.

"Cousin," Epaphras said. "I went to Brother Paul and asked him to come here and pray with you. I thought perhaps his prayers would bring you some comfort and healing. But he declined to come personally and instead sent me with this cloth. He has prayed over it, and now I am to lay it upon you and pray that the God of heaven will heal you."

With those words Epaphras laid the cloth on Philemon's chest and prayed, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, be healed of your infirmity."

At first nothing happened, and Epaphras wondered whether he should go and insist that Paul come personally. But then, slowly, the color began to return to Philemon's face. Within minutes the fever had broken, and the aches in his body began to disappear. For the rest of the afternoon Philemon's condition improved, and by sunset he was back to his normal self, eating and drinking for the first time in nearly a week.

If the teachings about Jesus from Epaphras and Paul weren't enough to convince Philemon to become a follower of Jesus, the miraculous healing was. The next morning he was baptized by Epaphras in the River Cayster while Paul, Demas, and the rest of the church looked on. When Philemon arrived home, he insisted that Apphia also be baptized along with their children. At Epaphras's request, they began hosting the church in Colossae in their home and became a blessing to many in the Lycus Valley. Now whenever Philemon returned to Ephesus he no longer went to the Artemis shrine but instead to the church in Demas's home. And he was always sure to spend some time listening to Paul in the school of Tyrannus and even speaking to those in the hall about Jesus.

Philemon has certainly lived up to his name, Calmus thought. The man was known for his generosity. He not only hosted the church, but he also provided food and money to those in need and sometimes allowed them to stay in his home. Those who knew Ovid's story sometimes commented about how just as Philemon and Baucis refreshed Zeus and Hermes, so too Philemon and Apphia often refreshed the hearts of the saints in Colossae and beyond.

In spite of his generosity to those outside the household, it didn't necessarily extend to his slaves. While not an overly harsh master, Philemon did have a temper that could erupt at any moment. Several years ago Calmus had witnessed a slave clumsily spill a vat of dye in the workshop. Philemon was furious with him. He had not only wasted the dye and made a mess, but he had ruined a quantity of wool ready for delivery. Philemon used a mixing paddle to beat the slave in a blind rage. The slave survived, but he carried a scar on his forehead as a reminder to never again be so clumsy.

Some owners were legendary for their cruelty to slaves. Calmus had once heard about a dinner Vedius Pollio hosted for Emperor Augustus. During the dinner one of the slaves broke a costly goblet. In his rage, and perhaps in an attempt to impress Augustus, Pollio ordered the slave thrown into a pond of flesh-eating eels. The slave fell at the emperor's feet and begged for mercy. Fortunately, Augustus

was able to convince Pollio to relent. While the story was popular among slaves, most realized that few, if any, of them would have the opportunity to appeal to the emperor for clemency.

Fortunately, Philemon was not opposed to his slaves pairing up and creating some semblance of family life. Although romantic relationships and marriage were not technically legal for slaves, they weren't usually forbidden. A slave with a spouse and children, it was reasoned, was more likely to add extra effort and diligence to their work.

Philemon and Baucis

Although the name Philemon was a common one in the region, it was popularly associated with a fable recorded by Ovid. In the story, Zeus and Hermes enter a small village disguised as peasants and begin asking people for a place to stay. Everyone refuses them except a poor elderly couple named Philemon and Baucis. The couple invites the disguised gods into their home and provides them with food and drink from their meager stores. Since their generosity surpasses that of their richer neighbors, the gods help them to escape the village before destroying it. The story made the couple's names synonymous with acts of hospitality.

But the owner always had final say over the slave's body. Calmus once knew a female slave in Laodicea. He enjoyed her company and spent time with her whenever he visited Laodicea with Philemon. Then one day, while walking through the city, he noticed a young girl standing in the doorway of a brothel. When their eyes met, they recognized each other immediately and turned away quickly. Although they never spoke again, Calmus understood. Her master probably had been in need of money and decided to place her with the brothel until she could earn the amount he needed.

Treatment of Slaves

The type of treatment slaves received ultimately depended on the disposition of their owner. Some masters cared for and treated their slaves as if they were their own children, even going so far as to adopt them and make them heirs. Most were probably not inclined to such acts of kindness, however. They provided slaves with the bare minimum of food and clothing and in some cases worked them to the point of exhaustion and/or death.

For many owners, occasional beatings were a way to ensure that slaves remained obedient. Punishments were often cruel and included flogging, shackling, branding of the face and forehead, and being fitted with an iron collar. Dismemberment and maiming were not uncommon.

Slaves were, however, afforded some protection under the law if they thought they were being excessively mistreated. Temples and statues of the emperor legally provided a place of asylum. According to Roman jurist Ulpian, it was the responsibility of the city prefect to hear the complaints of slaves against their masters. There was even the possibility of an appeal to the emperor himself. Proximity and access, however, were probably significant factors as to whether or not a slave could find opportunity for an appeal or asylum.

In spite of his temper and the occasional physical punishment, Philemon made sure his slaves were cared for. And he never had sex with his slaves.

Sexuality and Marriage Among Slaves

Because slaves had few civil rights, owners had complete control over their body. Sexual abuse was not uncommon in a variety of forms, and owners would often gratify their own desires with slaves from their household. Young boys and girls could be purchased for the express purpose of providing sexual indulgence for the buyer. It was also not unheard of for slaves to be expected to provide sexual services to their master's guests or even to be lent out for such purposes. The sale of slaves as prostitutes, both male and female, provided additional economic benefits for the owner.

Marriage was a privilege forbidden to slaves since they were unable to create any form of legal relationship. Slave families were allowed to exist, however, at the discretion of the owner. While this might be viewed as an act of humanity and benevolence toward a slave, in reality it was a form of social control. By allowing them to experience and enjoy the semblance of family life, the master gained more control over the slave population, making the system easier to maintain. Owners recognized that a slave with a spouse and children was less likely to flee or resist.

While marriage was technically forbidden, sexual contact among slaves was not. In a handbook on agriculture, Marcus

Terentius Varro recommends that slave owners view the purpose of female slaves as not only to prepare food but also to have sexual relationships with herdsman (*On Agriculture* 2.10.6). It was hoped that these relationships would make it easier to control the male population and make them more diligent in their work.

In addition to control, this attitude toward sex among slaves also provided owners with a perpetual source of slaves. All children born to a slave were legally slaves.

One exception to these practices was wet nurses. It was believed that milk production would either cease or spoil if a nursing woman had sexual relations. This means that while on the one hand these women were protected from the sexual advances of their owner, on the other hand they were forced to discontinue any sexual engagements with other slaves. Absolute power over a slave meant the owner decided whether a slave had intercourse and with whom.

Nonetheless, it was somewhat vexing for Calmus to witness Philemon's generosity to those who would never repay him. He showed kindness to the poor and destitute and even allowed them to eat at his table. Calmus had been in the house during a handful of the meetings and witnessed people of various social statuses sitting and sharing a meal together. And some of the stories and words about the man Jesus he overheard suggested that there was a god who thought that people should treat one another with love, kindness, and respect. Yet, these benefits didn't seem to extend to slaves. Slaves served the meal, ate separately from the group, and weren't part of the worship that took place afterwards.

Perhaps, Calmus wondered, this Jesus is the god of the free but not the enslaved.

EPHESUS

Life as a Slave



TIRO SWUNG THE DOOR OPEN and stepped back, allowing two other men to enter the room. Onesimus walked in looking better. He was still visibly nervous, but not to the point of exhaustion, as he had been the last time he visited.

Demas didn't come this time. Instead it was Tychicus, who had been with Demas when they first discovered Onesimus in the agora. Tiro closed the door while Tychicus greeted Paul with a hug and kiss, then made his way to a corner of the room and sat on the floor. Tiro greeted Paul and then sat on a stool across from Onesimus with his arms folded over his chest in a posture that seemed to communicate he was watching Onesimus.

Onesimus attempted to sit on the floor as well, but Paul stopped him.

"No, no, my friend, you sit here on the stool. I sit enough every day. You sit and let me stretch my legs a bit."

Onesimus was surprised. He was used to making sure the best seat was given to those more worthy and of higher status, which meant just about anyone else. Although a prisoner, Paul was still far more important than a slave.

Becoming a Slave

The factors under which people could become slaves varied according to the circumstances in which they found themselves. Prisoners of war provided a steady supply of slaves in the Mediterranean world. Some were enslaved as a result of being kidnapped and sold into slavery (1 Tim 1:10). Others were born slaves. The general principle was that a child born to a female slave was a slave.

Penal slavery existed to punish crimes committed against the state. Actions such as evasion of a census to avoid taxes, avoidance of military service, and a judgment against a debtor could force anyone into slavery. In limited cases, one could even sell oneself into slavery in order to gain a better standing of living once freedom had been regained. But this was risky. Masters had so much control over slaves that there was no guarantee that a master would live up to any agreement made.

"I am glad you came to visit with me again, Onesimus," Paul began. "Our last interview was hastily arranged, and you were so tired from your recent trip that you slept through much of it." Paul chuckled.

"I didn't have much choice in the matter," Onesimus replied a bit churlishly, looking toward Tychicus and Tiro.

"Well, yes, I suppose that's true," Paul said. "Nonetheless, I wanted a chance to learn more about you."

"What do you want to know?" Onesimus asked.

"Well, for starters, are you originally from Colossae? Did you live anywhere else before Philemon's household?"

"I have no memory of being anywhere else. I've always been his slave."

"So you were born a slave, then?" Tiro interjected.

"I don't know. I wasn't born in Philemon's house. I came there when I was a year old."

"So your mother brought you with her?" Paul asked.

"I never knew my mother," Onesimus answered. "I suspect she either died or abandoned me at birth and I was picked up by the slave traders."

"But you survived being exposed," Paul said. "That's something to be thankful for. You are alive!"

Exposure of Infants

Children born to free citizens were not guaranteed liberty from slavery. Among the challenges faced by ancient societies were overpopulation and too many mouths to feed. Large families were not the norm, and the preference was usually for sons. Daughters were considered an economic liability since a dowry would be required for any marriage.

Antiquity was also a time when little effective means of birth control existed, and abortion was extremely dangerous. The exposure (throwing away) of newborn infants was a

practiced form of post-birth control. When these infants were found, they were able to be claimed and raised as slaves (Pliny the Younger, *Epistle* 10.6s-6). An example of this practice is found in a letter from Egypt in which a man writes to his wife: "I beg and entreat you, take care of the little one, and as soon as we receive our pay I will send it up to you. If by chance you bear a child, if it is a boy, let it be, if it is a girl, expose it" (Oxyrhynchus Papyri 744).

In his *First Apology* second-century church father Justin Martyr condemns the practice of infant exposure (1.27). He claims that many of the exposed infants, both boys and girls, were raised to be prostitutes, often slaves owned by a brothel.

"Survived?" Onesimus raised his eyebrows. "I suppose that's one way of looking at it." He shook his head and continued. "My earliest memories are of being cared for by a slave woman until I was about six. By that time she was older, and her milk had dried up. Since she was no longer able to nurse children, Philemon sold her. At that point, I began working around the house, serving Apphia."

"Might your name provide any clue about your origins?" Tychicus asked.

"My name was given to me by Philemon when he bought me from the slave trader. It is a name his father gave to slaves in the past. There have been several slaves named Onesimus in that household over the years. I suppose Philemon thought it would be easier to keep with the tradition."

Paul seemed to consider Onesimus's response for a while. Then he said, "Well, we know that you are a slave in Philemon's home, but tell us, why did you leave?"

"I have never been able to resign myself to being a slave," Onesimus replied. "There are many who live and work as slaves and never question it. They believe, as do their masters, that they were born to be slaves, that nature made them this way. But I stopped believing that many years ago."

"And what led to this change of mind?" Paul asked.

"I once accompanied Philemon to Hierapolis to buy some items for Apphia. In the agora I encountered a small crowd around a man standing on a rock speaking to them. I later learned he was a teacher of Stoicism who had studied in Rome and was traveling about recruiting students who wanted to learn the sayings of Seneca, Cicero, and others. He said many things that day, most of which I don't remember. But I do remember that he told the crowd that many masters are excessively cruel to their slaves. He said that 'You should treat your inferiors as you would be treated by your betters.'

Slave Names

Slaves did not choose their own name, nor were they permitted to use the name of their father. They were known by their servile name, and the only formal connection they had to anyone was their master. Thus unlike other people we know from the New Testament, such as “Paul of Tarsus” or “Simon son of Jonah,” Onesimus would have been known as “Onesimus slave of Philemon.” The stigma of slavery prevented slaves from identifying with any person or place outside their servile status. The stigma even carried over into freedom, when former slaves became known as the freedman of their former master. Even in death the stigma remained, as evidenced by the many tombstones that identify an individual as a slave or freedperson of someone.



Figure 5.1. Tomb of Regina.

The tomb of Regina is an interesting example. A native of Britain living in second-century Roman Britain, she was at one time a slave, although we don't know how or when she became a slave. But as the epitaph on her tomb reveals, she eventually was freed by her owner, Barates, a native of Palmyra in Syria, who also married her and paid for this ornate monument for her. She is portrayed in the pose and dress of an upper-class Roman, wearing a necklace of large beads, seated on a high-backed chair with spindle and distaff in hand, emphasizing her position as *materfamilias*. Next to her are a

strongbox and a basket of wool symbolizing her role as manager of her husband's household. The inscription reads: "To the spirits of the dead, Regina, freedwomen of her husband Barates of Palmyra, from the tribe of the Catuvellauni, age thirty" (RIB 1065, "Funerary Inscription for Regina," R. G. Collingwood, R. P. Wright, *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965]).

Note how her former status as a slave is stated even though she became free, married her master, and apparently became quite successful. Even in death the stigma of slavery remained, and she is forever described in a way that points out her slave status.

"Some in the crowd seemed to agree with him, while others grumbled a bit. But then he said, 'Kindly remember that he whom you call your slave sprang from the same stock, is smiled upon by the same skies, and on equal terms with yourself breathes, lives, and dies. It is just as possible for you to see in him a freeborn man as for him to see in you a slave.'¹

"At this point, some began shouting at him while others began throwing mud and pieces of rotten fruit. They objected to the suggestion that people like me were anything but slaves by nature. I left before things became too violent. But whenever we went to Hierapolis I would search out the agora until I found someone teaching the principles of Stoicism. Over time I realized that although I was outwardly a slave, I could be free inwardly."

"But what made you then flee from Philemon?" Paul asked.

"Well, I'd had enough of being a slave, but even more, I'd had enough of the cruelty that Philemon sometimes used to make his slaves obey. I could never forget the teaching I heard that day. We are equals by birth and should treat one another as we want to be treated." Onesimus sighed heavily. "I feared Philemon was thinking about selling me. So, not knowing whether the devil I would be sold to would be better or worse than the one I already knew, I decided to run away. My plan was to come to Ephesus and find a ship that would take me far away from here. My greatest desire is to travel to Rome and seek out a teacher who could teach me more about Stoicism. But I know that is more dream than reality."

The men sat in silence for several moments. Finally, Tiro asked, "Why run away? Why not work hard, make your master happy, and one day seek manumission? Why flee and live with the fear of being caught hanging over your head?"

The Slave from Hierapolis

Turned Stoic

Hierapolis was the birth place of the well-known Stoic philosopher Epictetus. He was the son of a slave woman, born around AD 55. He spent his youth in Rome as a slave to a freedman who worked as a secretary to Nero. He apparently displayed an interest in philosophy and was permitted by his owner to study under the Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus. He gained his freedom sometime after Nero's death in AD 68. He was banished from Rome with other philosophers by the emperor Domitian in AD 93. His teachings were later written down by one of his students. While there is no direct evidence of Stoicism being taught at Hierapolis, the story of Epictetus, a former slave from that town who went on to become a well-known philosopher, provides some important historical context for understanding Onesimus as a slave in the Lycus Valley.

“And when might that be?” countered Onesimus. “When I’m older, no longer able to fulfill my daily tasks in the house? Or when Philemon decides I am no longer useful and decides to sell or release me? Like he did my wet-nurse? If I am lucky I’ll be under fifty. And then where would I go?”

Manumission

Roman slavery was not necessarily a permanent situation. Some urban and domestic slaves could anticipate emancipation by age thirty provided that they were able to meet the legal stipulations. Owners were prevented, however, from releasing a slave from service directly. Both slave and owner were required to appear before a magistrate, who would witness the manumission ceremony. At the time of the emancipation ceremony a freedom tax was required to be paid to the magistrate. Often the owner required a slave being emancipated to pay this tax in addition to whatever price the slave might be paying for freedom. At the conclusion of their manumission, if all the above conditions had been met, then the freedperson could become a Roman citizen if they had been owned by a Roman citizen.

“But there are many who have gained their freedom and went on to become prominent members of society,” Tiro argued. “Look at the entrance to the agora, where Demas and Tychicus discovered you. It was erected by Mazaeus and Mithridates, two imperial freedmen.”

“I once accompanied Philemon on another trip, south to Aphrodisias,” Onesimus said, seemingly ignoring Tiro. “It was there I first heard of Gaius Julius Zoilos, the slave of Julius Caesar. When Caesar died, Zoilos passed to Augustus, who eventually freed him. Zoilos returned home to Aphrodisias with Augustus as a powerful patron. He used his newfound wealth and status to become a generous benefactor to his hometown. When he died the citizens of Aphrodisias built a large monument to honor him.”

Onesimus paused, looking at Tiro and the others as they waited for him to finish his thought.

The Gate of Augustus

The gate of Augustus was built by two former imperial slaves. Mazaeus and Mithridates were originally owned by Augustus and then by his son-in-law, Agrippa. Upon being freed, they settled in Ephesus. After making their fortunes, they constructed the gate and dedicated it to the Emperor Augustus, his wife, Livia, his daughter, Julia, and his son-in-law, Agrippa.



Figure 5.2. Gate erected by Mazaeus and Mithridates.

Originally this gate was not the entrance to the Tetragonos agora. The gate had been constructed as a triumphal arch that was part of the original road leading to the city from the north. But an earthquake during the reign of Tiberius caused major parts of the city to be rebuilt. Then the Tetragonos agora was

constructed, and the triumphal arch was incorporated into the agora as the south entrance.

Apparently the gate was also a convenient place for local denizens to relieve themselves, as evidenced by an inscription inside the gate cursing “those who piss here.”

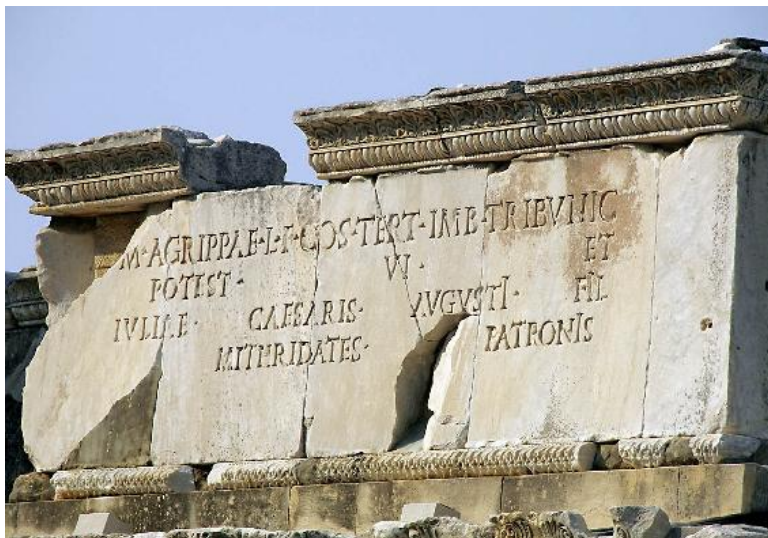


Figure 5.3. Inscription on gate erected by Mazaeus and Mithridates.

“It is thrilling to hear about former slaves becoming powerful and wealthy. But Zoilos, Mazaeus, Mithridates . . . they’re unusual. All of them were imperial slaves, and they always had a greater chance of success because of who their masters were. Most of us, the house slave, the slave working in a farm field, the dye works, or a mine—that type of freedom is not something we can or should dream about. Most of us will die while enslaved or soon after gaining our freedom.

“And so that’s why I ran away. Philemon can be a cruel master. I have come to realize that if I want my freedom, I must seize it when I can. So when I saw the opportunity, I fled. If it hadn’t been for Demas and Tychicus I would probably be on my way to Rome now.”

When Onesimus finished speaking, everyone sat there, letting his words sink in. After a few moments, Tiro stood up and announced that it was time to go. Paul thanked Tiro, and as they left, Paul said to him, “I should like to see Onesimus again in a day or two. Will that be possible, Tiro?”

Tiro agreed, but it was clear that neither he nor Onesimus was enthused about returning to the prison again in each other’s company.

LAODICEA

The Pursuit

MAGNUS OPENED THE DOOR TO THE STREET to find Archippus standing there. The look on the slave's face communicated his displeasure at seeing Archippus. Nonetheless, Magnus invited him into the vestibulum and was about to leave and announce the arrival of the guest when Archippus stopped him.

"Before you call Nympha, Magnus, I wonder whether I might have a word with you."

"My mistress will be eager to know of your presence," Magnus answered.

"Yes, I know, but this will only take a minute," Archippus said. "Come, can we sit here on the bench and talk?"

Magnus looked alarmed and bemused at the same time. Although he and the other slaves were treated fairly well by Nympha, he had never sat with Manilus or Nympha. Slaves were expected to stand in their presence. The only time he sat was when it was required by a particular task, such as putting on the master's sandals or helping in the bath.

"Please," repeated Archippus, "this will only take a moment."

Magnus sat down slowly, instinctively looking around to see whether anyone might be watching.

"I see you quite regularly, Magnus, between my visits to Nympha's garden and the church meetings. Yet, not when the church is meeting. Why is that?"

"I am there during the meal," Magnus answered.

"Yes, but you are there to oversee the serving of the food," Archippus replied.

"Is there something that displeases you about the meal?"

"No, no, you are a very skilled, capable household manager. I have no reason to complain, and I am sure neither does your mistress. No,

what I mean is, why don't you stay in the room, listen to the discussion, and perhaps even take part in the meal with the rest of us?"

Magnus was visibly troubled. Standing up, he said, "I am a slave in my mistress's house. I know my place and my job. Why would I presume to dine with her and her guests? Do you wish me punished or sold? Do you hate me so much? Haven't you caused enough chaos in this house only now to undermine the order of things completely?"

Archippus stood up too and tried to reassure the slave. "I mean you no harm, Magnus. Nor do I intend to undermine Nympha's authority in this household. I am grateful for her generosity to me and the church, which often includes the services of you and her other slaves. However, as the elder in this valley, at least while your mistress's brother is in prison, I have the obligation to ensure that his teachings and that of the Lord are upheld. And thus I would invite you to participate in one of our meetings, including the meal, if you are so inclined."

Magnus objected once again in as strong a tone as he dared.

"I am a slave and have no place sitting with my mistress and her guests as they worship their god."

"We worship a God who became a slave and died a slave's death in order to save all of humanity, including slaves," Archippus replied gently. "I am confident he would sit to eat with you." Archippus paused, looking straight at Magnus, and then said, "I've seen you hesitate at the doorway, sometimes listening to what's being said. I suspect you have seen or heard something that makes you want to join us."

Magnus was relieved at that moment to spot Nympha coming toward them from the garden. Archippus saw her as well and concluded their conversation. "I will speak to Nympha about my invitation. And then it will be up to the two of you what happens next."

Archippus greeted Nympha, who took his arm and began walking with him toward the garden.

"I hope Magnus wasn't being impertinent," she said.

"No, no. I was merely speaking with him about preparations for the upcoming meeting. But more on that later. I have something I want to discuss with you."

Nympha and Archippus went to their usual spot and sat down on the bench in the garden. "I was in the agora this morning and saw your cousin Philemon," Archippus began. "I thought perhaps he might have stopped here to see you."

"No, but he often visits Laodicea without stopping to visit. He sometimes visits the Cloth Hall to talk with potential buyers."

“Well, that is not the reason he was in the city today,” Archippus replied. “He came to see Stephanus, the magistrate.”

“To enlist his help with finding Onesimus?” Nympha guessed.

“Yes, and as you can probably imagine, Stephanus is only too eager to help,” Archippus stated.

“I am not surprised,” Nympha said.

“Are you aware of Stephanus’s reputation? He can be quite cruel to his slaves and more than happy to punish those who flee their masters.”

Zoilos of Aphrodisias

Fifty-five miles southwest of the Lycus Valley sits Aphrodisias, an important Roman-era city. It was here that Zoilos, a former slave, became a wealthy benefactor. Unlike Onesimus, Zoilos is not someone we read about in ancient literature. What we know about him has been pieced together from archaeological evidence. Excavators at Aphrodisias have discovered Zoilos’s name on the dedicatory inscriptions of Aphrodite’s temple, the north portico of the agora, and the theater. One inscription refers to him as “savior and benefactor of his country.” For a time, archaeologists assumed he was part of a local aristocratic family. But their perspective changed with the discovery of a theater inscription that identifies him as “Gaius Julius Zoilos, freedman of the divine Julius’s son Caesar.” Zoilos was not an aristocrat by birth; he was a former slave.

Zoilos was probably a native of Aphrodisias, kidnapped or captured in war and sold as a slave to Julius Caesar. When Julius died, Zoilos passed over to Augustus, who eventually manumitted him. We know Zoilos was close to the emperor since Augustus once wrote in a letter to Stephanus of Laodicea: “You know how fond I am of my Zoilos.”

During the civil war between Augustus and Mark Antony, Stephanus was the governor in Laodicea and a supporter of Mark Antony. When Mark Antony fell out of favor with Augustus, Stephanus successfully switched sides. Zoilos, however, now Augustus’s freedman, helped keep Aphrodisias loyal to the emperor during the civil war. The reward to Aphrodisias and Zoilos was the freeing of the city and the exemption from taxes. Although there is no historical record of tension between Stephanus and Zoilos, the pointed nature of Augustus’s letter suggests there may have been reason to suspect that Stephanus needed to be reminded of his place.

The letter must have been a great source of pride and

prestige, since it has been permanently preserved as part of an inscription found in the theater Zoilos helped fund. It reads:

Caesar to Stephanus

Greetings,

You know my affection for my friend Zoilos.

I have freed his native city and recommended it to Antonius.

Since Antonius is absent, take care that no burden falls upon them.

This one city, I have taken for my own out of all Asia.

I wish this people to be protected as my own townsmen.

I shall be watching to see that you carry out my recommendation to the full.

Zoilos must have been an intelligent and resourceful slave since he somehow amassed a great deal of wealth, which he later used to benefit his hometown. When he died in the 20s BC, the people of Aphrodisias established a large monument in his honor.



Figure 6.1. These reliefs come from a funerary monument with Zoilos in the center. On the left, Bravery presents Zoilos a shield while Honor crowns him from the right. The scene celebrates Zoilos's military courage and status as a Roman citizen. Also on the right is Demos, a personification of the people who reaches to greet Zoilos, while the city (Polis) crowns him from behind.

“Yes,” Nympha responded. “Some think he is still bitter over the way his grandfather was treated when he was the governor of Laodicea. The family has never forgotten how the emperor took personal ownership of Aphrodisias and exempted it from taxes.”

“I suspect you are correct. I know how the city was given to Zoilos, one of Augustus’s freedmen. I imagine that is part of the source of his treatment of slaves.”

“Yes, I know of Zoilos, and I suspect even many slaves do too,” said Nympha. She sighed. “Like many, Stephanus considers freedmen to be nothing more than social climbers.”

“Have you heard what Criangoras of Lesbos had to say about the freedmen of Corinth?” Archippus asked. “His poem is quite bitter.” He tilted his head back, closed his eyes as if to help him remember, and began speaking: “What inhabitants, O luckless city, have you received, and in place of whom? Alas for the great calamity of Greece! Would, Corinth, that you be lower than the ground and more desert than Libyan sands, rather than wholly abandoned to such a crowd of scoundrelly slaves, you should vex the bones of the ancient Bacchiadae!”¹

When he had finished, Archippus reached into his tunic and pulled out a sheet of papyrus. Unrolling it, he held it for her to see and said: “This is the result of Philemon’s visit to Stephanus.”

There was quite a bit of writing on the sheet, but Nympha quickly realized it was a wanted poster seeking the return of Onesimus.

A slave of Philemon wool dyer of Colossae has fled

Known by the name Onesimus and 20 years of age

Medium stature, beardless, a dimple on the chin, a mole on the left side of his nose and scar over his left eye. He is wearing a cloak and a loincloth

He has taken with him 180 denarii.

Whoever brings him back will receive 10 denarii

If he is found to be in the house of a substantial and legally actionable man, 20 denarii

Anyone with information should disclose it to the local magistrates and send word to Stephanus of Laodicea.

“I hadn’t realized he fled with so much money,” Nympha said as she lowered the poster.

“Yes, small wonder Philemon is so anxious for his return. Losing that amount of money could seriously damage his business,”

Archippus replied.

“And Stephanus will be eager to capture Onesimus and collect the reward.”

The Stigma of Slavery

The transfer from slavery to freedom did not always remove the shamefulness of one's previous status, a stain that only faded after several generations. Even if a freedperson was able to escape most of the negative aspects of their new status, the upper-class aristocracy generally despised them as social climbers who were causing chaos within the social ladder. A good example of this attitude is found in the Latin novel *Satyricon* by Petronius. In one scene, Petronius portrays a banquet hosted by a freedman named Trimalchio. During the dinner, Trimalchio tells how he became a slave and successfully moved to a position of high status. But in reality, the scene is absurd, and the inebriated Trimalchio reveals himself for what he really is: vulgar and socially inept. Petronius's lampooning of Trimalchio reflects the attitude that, despite being upwardly mobile, slaves and former slaves were never considered part of polite society.

“Yes, especially if he is found in the company of someone else,” Archippus added. “I know of a man who once knowingly kept a runaway, constantly threatening to hand him over to the authorities. The slave so feared being returned to his old master and severely punished that he remained with the man, who got the labor of a free slave.”

Apprehending Fugitive Slaves

Wanted posters were often used to alert authorities and travelers who could aid in the recapture of a fugitive slave. An example of such is a papyrus document from 196 BC that describes two Egyptian fugitives. As the document indicates, it was also not unusual for an owner to offer a reward for the return of a fugitive:

A boy called Hermon has run away at Alexandria, age about 15, wearing a cloak and a belt. Anyone who brings him back will receive 3 talents; anyone who gives information that he is at a shrine, 2 talents; if he is

with a man who can be trusted to accept a court ruling, 5 talents. Whoever wishes is to inform the governor's officials.

There is also another slave who has run away with him, Bion.

Whoever brings him back will receive the same as for the one specified above.

Inform the governor's officials as well.

An effective means of aiding in both preventing fleeing and the recapture of fugitives was iron collars. These were engraved with information that could have included the slave's name, the master's name, the address of the master, and a promise of reward for anyone who returns the fugitive. The practice of collars dates to the second century BC and is also represented in the later Christian period, as evidenced by Christian symbols. Two such inscriptions from Rome read:

I have run away: hold me. You will get a gold solidus if you return me to my master Zoninus.

I am called Januarius. I am the slave of Dexter, recorder of the Senate, who lives in the fifth region, at the field of Macarius.



Figure 6.2. Roman slave collar. The inscription reads: “I have run away: hold me. You will get a gold solidus if you return me to my master Zoninus.”

The purpose of these collars was so universally understood that, on one collar from Nîmes in southern Gaul, the Latin phrase *Tene me quia fugio* (arrest me, since I am a fugitive) was abbreviated to T.M.Q.F.

The wanted poster for Onesimus in this story is adapted from a second-century BC poster cited in S. R. Llewelyn, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 11-12.

“If there be such a person, woe to him,” Nympha said. “He would be wiser to hand over Onesimus to Stephanus than to keep my cousin’s slave to serve him.”

“We know the man, Nympha,” Archippus said, looking directly at her.

“What? Onesimus is in Laodicea? With someone we know?”

“He’s in Ephesus. I received word from Demas. Onesimus is there with him in Ephesus.”

“What? How? Will they alert my cousin and Stephanus?” Nympha demanded.

“I don’t know the details, but Demas has assured me they will send Onesimus back to Colossae soon,” Archippus answered. “In the meantime, he is meeting with Paul, and Demas thought it best to let someone here know what is going on.”

“With Paul? In prison? Is he with my brother?” Nympha asked anxiously. She was briefly distracted from the shocking news about Onesimus by the thought of her brother.

“I don’t know. But when Onesimus is sent back, I will have a part to play,” stated Archippus.

“What part could you have except to report Onesimus’s whereabouts directly to Stephanus or my cousin immediately?” Nympha replied, somewhat indignantly.

“Paul is asking me to help bring about reconciliation between Onesimus and Philemon,” Archippus said.

“Reconciliation between a runaway slave and his master?” She was incredulous.

“Yes. When the time comes, I will travel to Colossae to offer any advice and guidance I can.” Archippus paused before saying, “And I would like you to go with me. Apphia might need some support as we try to sort out this situation together as a church.”

Nympha sat silently for a few moments before responding. After a while she made a tentative promise: “I will think and pray about going, but I’m not sure I can commit quite yet.” She continued, “You’re asking me to be silent about a slave who belongs to my cousin, stole from him, and put his business and family in jeopardy.”

She paused a bit longer and then said, “And I don’t understand how this relates to the church. I know Philemon can be quick tempered and even cruel sometimes. But what does helping a fugitive have to do with the church? My cousin is well loved by the believers here in the valley, and he loves the church. How are the two related?”

Archippus saw the opportunity he had been seeking. “The connection between Philemon’s slaves and the church is the same one between you, your slaves, and the church that meets in your home.”

Nympha was completely confused now.

He continued, “We act differently in this valley. Many of the churches invite slaves into their midst, but we don’t include our slaves in the meeting.”

“What do you mean?” Nympha asked. “We should invite them to worship with us? Many of them are not believers. Why would they want to participate in our meeting worshipping our God?”

Archippus took a deep breath and replied, “Do you remember a story Epaphras shared once about James and John?”

“The two brothers? Yes,” she replied. “They were the ones who wanted to sit on Jesus’ left and right in glory, correct?”

“Yes. And do you remember Jesus’ reply?”

“I believe he told them: ‘Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant. And whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’”

“Yes. Do you see what this means?”

“I understand that I am to be a servant to my brothers and sisters in the Lord, but how does that relate to slaves, who are my property?”

“I once heard another poem,” Archippus responded. Once again he closed his eyes and tilted his head back slightly, saying:

Jesus, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to
his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a slave,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.²

When he finished, Archippus opened his eyes and turned to Nympha, saying, “Jesus became a slave to save us, Nympha. He commanded that we become slaves to one another. If we follow his example, humbling ourselves and becoming slaves to our brothers and sisters in the Lord, how can we avoid becoming slaves to those who are our slaves in the flesh?”

Nympha contemplated Archippus’s words for a few moments. “I hadn’t considered that my slaves might participate in the meeting. I wouldn’t have objected to their becoming followers of Jesus, but I hadn’t thought about them being freed from their duties in order to

participate in the meeting.”

“I think you might find some of them interested in attending the meeting, and,” he paused slightly, “they probably should be welcome to eat with us.”

Nympha was even more surprised and looked as if she might protest, but Archippus continued.

“I’ve invited Magnus to attend one of our meetings, with your permission, of course. I noticed him lingering around the doorway, and he isn’t simply waiting for us to finish and move to the dining room. He is listening to the teachings and stories of Jesus. I think he would like to learn more.”

“What would the others say if my slaves sat in the meeting or ate in the same room? Would I need to invite their slaves as well?”

“Yes, you would. I realize that this is a very different way of thinking about your household. But in reality you have already been living this way.”

“How so?” She was puzzled.

“When you allow those of a lower social class to eat at your table as equals, you are humbling yourself. And when you provide space for that homeless family to sleep, you are becoming a slave to them so that they might be saved.”

“Yes, but those are all freeborn individuals, not slaves.”

“Nympha,” Archippus replied, “when the church gathers in your home to worship, we don’t come before the Lord as Jews and Gentiles or men and women. We are all one in Christ. It should be the same for those born free and those who were not. In Christ, there is neither slave nor free, and this is how it should be when we meet and gather to eat together.”

Archippus stood up, thereby indicating that he had said his piece. “I will show myself out. And I promise not to mention the subject to Magnus again. He is, as you point out, your property to do with as you please. But I hope you will consider what I’ve said.”

Archippus turned and made his way toward the front door. As Nympha watched, Magnus opened the door. Archippus stopped and faced Magnus before he left. He said nothing to the slave but turned to look back at Nympha and then stepped into the street. As Magnus closed the door, he was conscious of Nympha watching him.

EPHESUS

Attending Church



DEMAS AND ONESIMUS ENTERED THE HOUSE with their arms full. They had been to the market to buy items needed for a meeting of the church later that evening. Kyrilla, Demas's wife, had given them a long list of food required for the evening meal as well as items and supplies for those in need.

The house was a modest one, especially when compared to some in the city. It was attached to a shop that belonged to a local merchant. The merchant's business had prospered, so he built a new home in a part of town more reflective of his improved social status. Demas and Kyrilla had begun renting the house when they moved from Thessalonica to assist Paul and his ministry in Ephesus. The house was two stories and contained several rooms, which made it fairly spacious. Demas and Kyrilla lived on the bottom floor, which was where the church met.

The upper level contained several rooms that had been rented out to various tenants by the merchant and his wife when they still lived there. Now the second-story rooms were used by Demas and Kyrilla's guests, usually Christians traveling to Ephesus to hear Paul preach and more recently to visit him in prison. Epaphras stayed there whenever he traveled from the Lycus Valley, and Tychicus and Luke were also permanently billeted on that floor. Other guests included believers who were poor, had fallen on hard times, or needed a place to stay. Demas and Kyrilla gave them shelter, fed them, and looked after whatever other needs they had. It was there Philemon was brought when he fell ill in the agora. And now Onesimus slept in the same bed once occupied by his estranged master.

Demas and Kyrilla didn't own any slaves and thus did everything on their own. Sometimes the guests upstairs would assist with running errands, cooking meals, or preparing for a meeting of the church. But

usually they were up and out early in the morning looking for jobs as day laborers. In the case of Luke and Tychicus, they spent much of their time visiting Paul, discussing the churches in Greece, Syria, and Asia Minor. So when Onesimus arrived in their home, as he wasn't otherwise occupied, the couple began asking him to assist them when they needed help. At first he resented their requests, since he wasn't owned by them. But he soon recognized that their requests were just that, appeals for help. They weren't demanding like a slave owner and didn't chastise him when he made a mistake. He was finally won over to them when he ruined a quantity of flour by spilling it into a basket of fish. When Kyrilla came over to look at the mess, he expected her to strike him or yell for Demas to come and beat the slave. Instead she merely bent over and began to clean up the flour and wash off the fish. Onesimus was so stunned by her lack of reaction that his only response was to bend down and help her salvage as much of the flour as possible.

Demas and Onesimus had barely unloaded their arms on the table when Kyrilla commenced giving orders about what needed to be done before the evening. Demas looked as if he might protest; instead, he shook his head in good humor and began moving benches around the room.

Slave Jobs

The jobs performed by slaves varied. Those not part of running a household could be found in agriculture, mining, and manufacturing. The role of slaves in domestic settings depended on the size of the household in which they served. A large, well-financed household might have a number of slaves each with a specific task (e.g., maid, butler, cook, stable boy). Smaller, poorer homes might have only a few slaves, each performing several tasks. Location could also determine the type of job a slave filled. One list from antiquity catalogs thirty-five different jobs performed by rural slaves, while another catalogs fifty jobs typically performed by slaves in the homes of the socially elite.

With the exception of military service, it seems no occupation in Roman society was closed to slaves. Similar job titles were frequently applied to slave and free alike. And it wasn't unusual for a master to fully trust his or her slave to act as the master's agent. Slaves might be found managing a household or a farm. They could manage a master's commercial interests, serve as captain of a ship delivering goods, and buy or sell property on behalf of the master. Some

even acted as bankers.

Onesimus began preparing some of the food, putting it on trays that could be passed around to the various guests. The process was a familiar one, since he had done much the same for the gatherings in Philemon and Apphia's home. But the atmosphere surrounding today's preparations was different. Although Kyrilla was in charge, Onesimus was not one of several slaves preparing the meal. He was actively working with Kyrilla and Demas to make ready for the evening gathering. Moreover, this was the first time Onesimus had prepared such a meal that he would be eating. In Philemon's household slaves were present to serve the members of the church but not to participate in the meeting. This time would be different, however. Onesimus would be present and participating with the group. While he wasn't interested in the god they were worshiping, he was intrigued to be a part of something that he had previously been excluded from.

The manner in which Onesimus's inclusion came about was also new. He was not invited to join. Indeed, no formal invitation had been extended to him. Rather, it was an assumption on the part of the couple that he would attend as a guest of the household. Although they knew he was a slave, they treated him in many ways as an equal. As he lived and worked among the believers coming and going each day, he began to see tangible examples of the type of behavior he had heard talked about by the Stoics in Hierapolis. He thought about this as he continued preparing alongside Demas and Kyrilla.



The meeting didn't start until later in the evening. Many of the household guests employed as day laborers needed to work while there was still light. Merchants, city officials, and more wealthy members of society had more control over their time and could attend meetings whenever. But laborers who lived from day to day couldn't risk leaving early or missing a day. There were always more laborers than jobs; if people wanted to find work at the same job the next day, they had to stay until the foreman said they were done. So the group had agreed some time ago that although some could come earlier, the meeting wouldn't start and the food wouldn't be served until everyone arrived.

Demas and Kyrilla's guests began arriving as the sun slowly disappeared from the sky. A variety of social classes were represented in the room, identifiable mostly by their dress. The day laborers wore tunics that stopped just above the knees, usually stained with residue from their various jobs. Merchants and those of a higher social class wore tunics that were cleaner and extended to the ankles. Unlike

laborers, they didn't need as much freedom of movement since they spent more time sitting. There was also a handful of Jews, obvious by their beard style and long tunics with blue tassels on the four corners. As they walked through the door they were greeted by the host couple. Regard for social class and rank seemed to evaporate upon entering the room. Each person was offered a hug and kiss by the host and the guests in turn offered the same greeting to one another. No matter who the person was, each was greeted the same way.

Onesimus stood in a far corner of the room where the light from the lamps wasn't as bright. He was feeling out of place. Although he knew he was not there as a slave, he wasn't sure how he should act, since he had virtually no experience at social gatherings other than as a slave. He was also concerned he might be discovered. Only four people in the house knew he was a fugitive: Demas, Kyrilla, Tychicus, and Luke. The rest of the guests assumed he was someone in need of a place to stay. There were so many coming and going in the second-floor rooms that no one thought twice to ask much about Onesimus. But now that the rest of the church members were beginning to gather, he was feeling more nervous. What if someone asked him too many questions? What if one of them knew his master? Perhaps they had met Philemon when he was ill and living upstairs! Is it possible that one of these members had traveled to Colossae and seen Onesimus during a meeting in Philemon's house? Would he be recognized?

He was ready to slip out the back and go upstairs when suddenly his heart skipped a beat. There standing in the doorway was Tiro, the prison manager. Onesimus knew Tiro was a friend of Paul and a Christian, but he hadn't anticipated seeing him in Demas's house! The anxiety he felt that first day in the prison returned. As he watched Tiro greet the others in the room, Onesimus instinctively moved deeper into the shadows of the corner. Tiro was speaking with Demas, who without warning pointed toward the corner. Tiro turned directly toward Onesimus, seemingly satisfied to see Onesimus still in the house but at the same time looking at him as if to give him a warning. Onesimus knew he was trapped. If he were to leave the room and not return, Tiro would surely notice and come looking for him.

He continued to watch from the corner. There were about twenty people in the room now. Some were guests from upstairs; others he hadn't met before. The door opened once again, and a man entered whom Onesimus was sure he recognized, but he didn't know from where. His tunic was short and stained, and his build was similar to that of a day laborer. But he wasn't tanned like someone who spent most days in the sun. From the look of it he seemed to be another slave. Onesimus moved into the light to get a better look. He watched

as the man was given the same greeting everyone else received upon entering the room. If he was a slave, he was treated no differently. He was hugged by both merchants and day laborers alike.

When the man turned to greet others in the room, Onesimus realized who he was. The man was a slave, a public one. He was the guard from that first day in the prison, the one who brought Onesimus and Demas to see Paul! Onesimus watched the slave move to greet the different guests, and he finally came to Tiro. Onesimus expected there to be some difference in the way they interacted. But the guard was greeted by the prison manager the same way; Tiro embraced him with a hug and a kiss. Onesimus couldn't believe his eyes. A master greeting his slave as if he were his equal, as if he were family.

Slave Appearance

Unlike the New World, slavery in Rome did not imply a difference of race or language. Any citizen could possibly become a slave, and any slave could possibly become a citizen. In Rome slaves blended in easily with the rest of the population, and the high rate of manumission meant that race or even dress was useless as a means of identification. Some saw this as a potential danger and sought a way to identify slaves. In a treatise written to the emperor Nero, the Stoic philosopher Seneca comments, "A proposal was once made in the senate to distinguish slaves from the free men by their dress; it then became apparent how great would be the impending danger if our slaves should begin to count our number" (Seneca, "On Mercy" 1.24.1, in *Moral Essays*, vol. 1, trans. John W. Basore, Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970], 421). In other words, if the proposal had been carried out, slaves would immediately have recognized their numerical strength and more readily contemplated rebellion.



Figure 7.1. This is one of the two “barbarian slaves” from the Captives Façade (ca. 160 AD), which was located at the entrance road to the agora

in Corinth. The “barbarian slaves” were actually columns in the façade, of which there were at least four.

A moment later, someone signaled it was time to begin the meeting. Once everyone had taken a seat in the room, Luke started the meeting by giving them an update on Paul and Epaphras and the pending trial. As Luke reported on the progress of Paul and Epaphras’s defense, Onesimus looked around. People were sitting next to one another on benches and overturned vessels or crates. A few were even on the floor. This social gathering didn’t follow protocol. Just as everyone was greeted at the door as equals, so too in the seating arrangements, social standing was unimportant. A day laborer sat next to a merchant, a Jew on a bench with a non-Jew. Even Tiro and the prison guard sat together, as if their status within society and the prison didn’t exist. Onesimus was carefully observing the circle when he realized everyone was looking at him.

“This is Onesimus, everyone,” Luke was saying. “He is staying with Demas and Kyrilla, so we thought it appropriate that he join the meeting tonight. Besides, he helped to prepare the food for this evening, an even better reason for him to join us.”

Onesimus was relieved no one asked further questions after Luke introduced him. Everyone either smiled or nodded with approval—everyone except Tiro, that is. He sat staring at Onesimus with the same look of warning he wore when first entering the house. Onesimus thought Tiro might stare at him all night until Demas, thankfully, put a hand on Tiro’s shoulder. Tiro glanced to his right, where Demas was sitting. Demas whispered something to Tiro, and the prison manager stopped watching Onesimus.

Luke then asked one of the Jewish participants to lead them in a song. When everyone was ready, the man sang a song with lyrics comparing a deer panting after water to his soul longing after his god. Some people in the group seemed to know the song, especially the Jews. Others weren’t as familiar with it but did their best to follow along.

When they finished, Luke picked up a papyrus sheet on the table next to him. “I thought I would share some more stories about Jesus tonight. As you know, I am collecting them, and I recently learned of another story that I think you will all enjoy. This one is about a Roman soldier and his slave.”

A Roman centurion owned a slave he valued highly. This slave became ill and close to death. The centurion didn’t want to lose the slave, so when he heard that Jesus was in town, he sent leaders from the local Jewish community asking him to come

and heal his servant.

These men went to Jesus and urged him to help the centurion, saying, “He is worthy of your help. He loves our people and he even built our synagogue.”

Jesus consented to go with them. But while he was still some distance from the house, the centurion sent a messenger saying, “Lord, there is no need for you to go to all this trouble. I’m not worthy enough to have you enter my home. Please, just give the command and my slave will recover. I’m a man under orders, and I also give orders. I tell one to ‘Go,’ and he goes; another, ‘Come,’ and he comes; to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

Jesus was surprised at the centurion’s response and praised his faith to those with him. He then sent the messenger back to the centurion. When he entered the house he found the slave fully recovered.

When Luke finished, the group began discussing the story around the circle. Some commented on the piety of the Roman soldier. The Jews noted Jesus’ willingness to enter the home of not only a Gentile but a soldier occupying the Jewish town. Everyone was amazed at the faith exhibited by the centurion and the way in which Jesus responded to it.

Slave Bodies

Slaves were counted not as people but as “things” (*res* in Latin). In lists of property, last wills and testaments, and censuses, the Greek term most often used to describe slaves is *sōma* (“body”). This attitude is evidenced by the way slaves were often used as surrogate bodies for their masters by being forced to take punishment in place of their master. For instance, if a person had failed to pay taxes, his slave might be seized and thrown into prison until the taxes and fines were paid. The rationale behind such practices was that the master lost the use of his slave and thus the benefit of his investment. When a slave was injured by a third party, it was not the slave who was considered injured but the master. Female slaves were often used as wet nurses to nourish the children of the master while their own child was sometimes displaced in favor of the freeborn child.

Onesimus sat there quietly thinking about the affection the centurion showed to his slave. Although he had never experienced

that sort of treatment from Philemon, he knew some slaves and masters developed close relationships. More often than not, however, like himself, slaves were treated not as persons but as beasts of burden—something to make the master's life easier and more bearable.

Even more surprising was Jesus' power to heal someone at a distance, Onesimus thought. And that he consented to healing a slave. If this story was true, it described a god who had compassion on all people, slave and free.

At the end of the discussion Demas asked whether anyone was in need. Some needed food, others money or clothing. A list was made, and different people around the circle either agreed to provide for those in need or to donate to a common fund distributed as needed. Those seeking shelter would be sent to Demas and Kyrilla. The formal part of the meeting closed with a prayer, and then they prepared to eat.

Onesimus stood to assist Demas and Kyrilla with bringing food to the group. The first person he presented a tray with fruit to was one of the local merchants. Onesimus expected him to serve himself, but instead the merchant stood, took the tray, and began serving a day laborer sitting to his left. After this person had taken some fruit, the merchant repeated the process with the next person. Onesimus was caught off guard. As he looked around the room, he witnessed the same thing happening everywhere. People were serving one another regardless of rank or status. As a slave, he was accustomed to serving guests. But these people didn't allow their status to dictate who served whom. Like the centurion in the story, they exhibited affection and friendship for everyone equally.

Realizing he was no longer needed, he looked for a seat, but the only place available was next to the slave he'd encountered in the prison. The guard recognized him and introduced himself as Eutyches. Onesimus quickly realized that the guard didn't know he was a fugitive. This was surprising, since he expected Tiro would have told him.

"I have seen you with the others visiting Paul," Eutyches said. "Will you be returning again?"

"Yes, but I am not sure when," Onesimus replied. He paused. "I must admit, I was surprised to see you here this evening."

"I come when I can," Eutyches said. "It's not easy for both Tiro and me to leave the prison, but we do it as often as possible."

"I couldn't help but notice the way he greeted you," Onesimus said. "Does your master always show you that type of affection?"

"Not in prison," Eutyches answered. "Although believers, we are still slave and master. If Tiro were observed breaking the expected customs, he could lose his job, which wouldn't be good for him or me."

But here in the company of our brothers and sisters, yes, we greet each other that way.”

“Brothers and sisters? You consider these people your family?”

“Oh yes, that is how we often refer to one another. God is my Father, and all these my siblings in Christ. I assumed you were a believer too,” Eutyches said, “but I see you are not.”

“No, I am merely a visitor here in this home.”

“Then why are you visiting Paul in the prison? Does your master have some business with him?”

Onesimus became nervous. Not only had Eutyches recognized that he was a slave, but he was beginning to ask questions. He was unsure how to answer him without raising suspicions.

“Yes, he is on business from his master,” Onesimus heard a voice say. He turned to see Tiro standing beside him. “He is here for a brief time to report on the churches in the Lycus Valley. With Brother Epaphras in our prison and his friends and family so concerned, Onesimus will return home soon to report back.”

For the first time that evening Onesimus was relieved to see Tiro. Eutyches accepted his master’s explanation and asked no more questions.

When the evening concluded, the group sang a final hymn and began departing. Those who had been in need were given the items Demas and Onesimus had purchased earlier in the day. As the guests exited the house, Demas and Kyrilla said goodbye and gave each one a kiss.



The harbor air blew through the window and chased the day’s heat from the room. It was late, and apart from the occasional sound of footsteps, the street below was dark and quiet. Most of the city was asleep, but Onesimus lay on his bed awake, replaying the evening in his mind. The encounter with Tiro and Eutyches was unexpected, but especially the way they greeted one another. He thought more about the story of Jesus, the soldier, and his slave. It seemed that neither Jesus nor his followers were very interested in whether one was rich or poor, slave or free. As he drifted off to sleep he remembered what he’d heard in Hierapolis and wondered, “Could slave and master really treat each other as brothers?”

COLOSSAE

The Freedman

CALMUS POSITIONED THE BENCH NEXT TO THE OTHERS. Apphia said they could expect up to twelve people for the meeting. This number didn't include any slaves that might accompany their masters, since they wouldn't be sitting with everyone else. Slaves typically waited in a room beside the *triclinium* and entered the meeting room only if requested by their master.

Apphia entered and looked over the arrangements approvingly. "Thank you, Calmus, I think that will be enough places for everyone to sit. Do you plan to be here when it's time to serve the food or will you be sending someone else?"

"I plan to stay, mistress," he replied. "The others are working to complete the final dye lot so that everything is ready to go to Ephesus when the master returns. Since I am not directly involved with the process and neither soiled nor smelly, I thought it best if I came to the house myself."

"Very well. I will appreciate having you here. I suspect you will be twice the help of Onesimus." She paused before continuing. "I wouldn't be surprised if, once Philemon finds and returns him home, we decide having him back isn't worth the trouble he has caused us. Philemon will surely sell him now. Of course, a slave with a recent history of running away won't bring much, nor is he likely to be brought into another home. He'll most likely end up in a mine or someplace else that affords him less freedom and opportunity to escape."

"Still no word, then?" Calmus inquired.

"No, nothing yet. Philemon traveled to Laodicea to file a report with Stephanus, the local magistrate. From there he was heading to Hierapolis for a couple of days to see whether he could spot Onesimus and inquire whether anyone had seen him. Apparently Onesimus often

lingered around the agora whenever in Hierapolis. Perhaps he met someone there who offered to help him escape. In any case, Philemon should be home in a few days. He will be disappointed to miss today's meeting. But I received a message this morning that Archippus will be joining us again today. It will be good to hear any news he has about Paul and Epaphras."

With that, Apphia turned and went to check on the preparations in the kitchen, leaving Calmus alone with his thoughts. In truth, he didn't need to be there and probably should have sent someone else to help in the house. His place was as overseer of the dye works, not as a table server. Nevertheless, he decided to take advantage of Philemon's absence and Apphia's need for assistance. He had met a few of his master's Christian friends while conducting business but had never been present during a gathering. He saw this as a good opportunity to experience for himself a meeting of the church, as limited as it might be.



The group began arriving soon after sundown. They were greeted as they arrived and shown into a large room in the house, where they would hold their meeting. There was a rise in volume when Archippus entered and with him Nympha. Apphia was clearly pleased to see her husband's cousin, and the two embraced with smiles and even a few tears.

The sounds traveled to the back of the house, where Calmus and the other slaves stood waiting in the kitchen. In addition to the slaves owned by Philemon and Apphia, a pair of slaves belonging to one of the other guests had joined them. While the other household slaves knew these two, they were new to Calmus.

Calmus stood to the side while the other slaves talked and prepared the meal. Since this was not Calmus's usual station in life, he had no specific task to perform except to wait for when it was time to serve the guests.

Suddenly the household manager entered and clapped his hands to announce that the guests were reclining around the *triclinium*. On cue, the slaves began carrying trays of food to the dining room. Calmus was given a jug full of wine. As he walked around the center of the table filling the vessels stationed in front of the guests, he noticed how the group was mixed socially. It was clear by their dress and appearance that they weren't all of the same social or economic status. Emphasizing these differences were the seating arrangements. Certain seats were reserved for those who were of higher status or deserving more honor than others. Archippus, who was not only an honored guest but the leader of the evening's meeting, was at the head of the

table. Nympha and Apphia were on either side of him, and those who were next in status or honor were on either side of them. At the end corner of the table was a local freedman who worked as a wool buyer. Calmus recognized him from around town and the Cloth Hall in Laodicea. He had been a slave once but gained his freedom when his master died. Calmus reflected on how even in freedom this man was not completely equal to the others. Although no longer a slave and certainly of higher status than Calmus, he was still lower in status than everyone else around the table.

The Status of Freedpersons

Being a freedperson did not mean total independence from one's former master and any obligations toward him. The freedman or -woman was in an intermediate state of being not completely free but under contract to the previous owner. A work obligation was placed on the freedperson that required the provision of labor for the master for a specified number of days each year. In addition to economic responsibilities, the freedperson also had social obligations to the former master. Social respect was demanded, and disobedience was a punishable offense. The freedperson was still very much a slave, but without receiving any of the former master's provision.

Contrary to the legal status of a slave, however, the freedperson maintained certain rights. He could not be required to perform any work that was impossible due to age, health, or skill (*Digest* 38.1.17). The patron was required to allow the freedperson sufficient time to earn an income to feed him- or herself (*Digest* 38.1.19). Obligations of service could be reduced due to health complications or if a freedperson reached a social position that was not fitting for such services (*Digest* 38.1.34). Any services that a freedperson did not promise to perform could not become part of the obligation, even if they were formally performed while a slave (*Digest* 38.1.31). These rights, and a variety of others, protected the freedperson from being completely enslaved while being labeled free.

Calmus looked up as Archippus began speaking. "Brothers and sisters, I realize that this is the point in the evening when we share a meal, but I wonder whether I might share a story with you. It's one of Jesus' parables that I recently heard from our brother Luke. It is quite

fitting for the occasion. Shall I tell it while we are served our meal?"

The guests readily agreed, and so Archippus began telling the story as the slaves continued serving:

Jesus once went to a dinner where he noticed the guests choosing places of honor at the table. Seeing this, Jesus said, "When you go to a dinner, don't sit at the place of honor, lest someone more important than you was also invited. Because the host will say to you, 'Please give your seat to him,' forcing you to sit at the last place available. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the far end of the table, so that when the host sees you, he might say, 'Friend, please sit here'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For everyone who exalts themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

When he finished, Archippus sat silently, allowing the impact of the story to work its way into the minds of the guests. After a moment, Archippus got up from the table and walked over to where the freedman was reclining and said, "Friend, I would be honored if you would take my place between the host and her cousin."

Stunned, the man slowly rose and walked over to the head of the table to recline between Apphia and Nympha. Some of the guests watched the scene with a mix of confusion and barely concealed distaste for what they were witnessing. Others seemed ashamed, as if Archippus's story had somehow been about them.

Calmus watched the entire episode unfold while positioned in front of the freedman's place, now occupied by Archippus. He came to himself when he realized that Archippus was holding up his vessel, requesting some wine. As he poured the wine, Calmus almost forgot himself and spoke to Archippus, but remembered where he was. He also realized that Apphia was looking at both him and Archippus, so he finished serving the guests and quickly exited the room.

After the meal, there was little for Calmus to do. The other slaves knew their jobs and were accustomed to being shorthanded whether Onesimus was present or not. So Calmus stood around thinking about the encounter in the dining room. Not only had Archippus told an unusual story, but he had treated a former slave in a way Calmus had never before witnessed. It was true that some freedmen were able to become wealthy, important people. But Calmus had never actually met a former slave who was shown the type of honor he had witnessed tonight. This man, Jesus, who first told the story, was certainly unlike the people one typically met in Colossae and the Lycus Valley.

With nothing to do in the kitchen, Calmus found himself

wandering away to other parts of the house. As he passed the room where the group was meeting, he could hear the sounds of a conversation taking place. Seeing no one else around, he drew closer to the entrance to overhear what was being said. He could tell they were discussing the story from the dinner. Someone was questioning whether Jesus' words should be applied to everyone, including slaves. Surely not everyone was of the same status?

Archippus replied, "Yes, even to slaves. Especially to slaves! I am aware of another saying of Jesus that emphasizes this point. Indeed, Nympha and I were talking about it the other day. And appropriately enough, it also focuses on seating arrangements. As I understand it, James and John once approached Jesus and requested that they be given the seats of honor each on the right and left of Jesus. Like you, the other followers of Jesus became upset with the two brothers, I presume because they thought they should have those seats. But Jesus' response to them shows that one should not seek honor and position, but rather humility and servitude. Jesus said to all of them: 'Those who rule over the ungodly constantly remind them that they are in charge and more important than they are. But if you want to be great among your friends, you must become their slave. Whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'"

Calmus wasn't sure he had heard Archippus correctly. Had he truly told this group of people that they must act like slaves to one another? He risked moving further into the doorway to hear better, but as he did he found himself directly in Archippus's line of vision. Before he could retreat, Archippus called to him.

"Calmus, is it? Please, come in. Your timing is excellent. Apphia, would it be okay with you if Calmus joined us for a bit?"

Calmus moved further into the doorway and the disapproving gaze of his mistress. He stood there, hesitating to enter until Apphia, somewhat reluctantly, agreed that he could enter the room.

"Please, sit down here next to me," said Archippus. "I think you can help me with the next point I want to make."

Calmus took a seat next to Archippus, all the while aware that Apphia was staring at him. As he looked around the room he could see that some seemed exasperated by his presence, while others seemed pleased. The freedman watched the proceedings with keen interest.

"I know that the presence of a slave in your meetings is not your usual practice," Archippus began. "I appreciate Apphia indulging me for a few moments and hope she will not charge my infraction against social practice to Calmus."

Apphia merely smiled weakly and nodded. It was clear to everyone that Archippus was preemptively diffusing any problems or

consequences between slave and owner by putting her on the spot in front of the whole group.

Who Was a Slave?

Aristotle taught that some people were “natural slaves.” He described them as living tools:

It is clear, then, that some men are by nature free, and others slaves, and that for these latter slavery is both expedient and right. (*Politics* 1.5)^a

The slave is a living tool and the tool a lifeless slave. (*Nicomachean Ethics* 8.11)^b

In Roman society one was either slave or free, and these distinctions were central to the social and the legal fabric of the Roman world. Roman jurist Florentinus defined freedom and slavery this way: “Freedom is one’s natural power of doing what one pleases, save insofar as it is ruled out by either coercion or by law. Slavery is an institution whereby someone is against nature made subject to the ownership of another” (*Digest* 1.5.4). Similarly, Marcian described human status as follows: “Of slaves, to be sure, there is but a single condition; of free men, on the other hand, some are freeborn and some are freedmen” (*Digest* 1.5.5).

Becoming a slave meant the complete loss of one’s rights. One Roman jurist commented: “As far as concerns the civil law, slaves are regarded as not existing. . . . We compare slavery closely with death.” Slavery terminated marriages, family ties, business partnerships, and any public or private offices held.



Figure 8.1. One source of slaves in the ancient world was prisoners of war. This relief (200 AD) depicts Roman soldiers leading a captive in chains. The relief comes from Smyrna, a city in Asia Minor located about eighty miles from Ephesus.

It is often noted that the type of slavery practiced in Rome was different from that practiced in North America in the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. In one sense this is correct, since Roman slavery was not based on race, and there were more opportunities available for slaves to become free. But caution should be exercised. At times, Roman slavery can be presented as a harmless institution that provided security and economic benefits to the enslaved. But it is important to remember that slavery, in whatever form or time period, is not a positive experience for the enslaved.

^aAristotle, *Politics* 1.5, trans. Ernest Barker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 17.

^bAristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.11, trans. Lesley Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 157.

“I also know,” he continued, “that some of you own slaves who are believers. They were baptized along with the rest of your household, and they participate in times of prayer and worship in your home.”

He said this while looking at one couple in particular. Calmus guessed that they owned one or both of the two slaves who had arrived earlier and were helping serve the meal.

“Yet, when you come together as the body of Christ you act differently than you do in your homes. Your slaves, some of them baptized believers, are not welcomed to hear the words of our Lord and the Holy Scriptures. When you gather to eat, slaves, who are your brothers and sisters in Christ, are there not to celebrate with you, but to serve you.”

“But they are slaves,” interjected someone. “Even if they are believers, why should we treat them as our equals? Does becoming a believer suddenly change one’s position in society? Did not Aristotle teach that some are born to be slaves?”

“Yes, Aristotle did say that. But as I said earlier, you must also become a slave—a slave of Christ, and a slave to your brothers and sisters and to the slaves you own. The way we treat our slaves in this valley is not the accepted practice among the other churches. In cities like Corinth and even nearby Ephesus, slave and master worship together as equals. They are one in Christ. Brother Paul has often said to us: ‘In Christ Jesus we are all children of God. One is neither Jew

nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free. All have been baptized in Christ, all are one in Christ, and we are, therefore, all are equal before him.'

"Brothers and sisters, these are more than slaves to you. They are brothers and sisters in Christ.

"I do not know whether Calmus is a believer or not. But I hope the next time I return to this home to meet with you as the church I will be able to worship our Lord together with all of the brothers and sisters in Christ. That is the practice among the other churches, and it is what Christ wants of us."

EPHESUS

Slave of Christ

ONESIMUS MADE HIS WAY THROUGH THE STREETS, a sack in one hand and a jug in another. This was his fourth trip to the prison. The first two visits had been to get acquainted with Paul and to explain the circumstance of his separation from Philemon. His third trip had been yesterday. He and Demas had made a quick stop at the prison in the morning on their way to the market to buy items for the meeting later that night. The purpose of the visit today was the same as yesterday: to bring food to the apostle. Since inmates weren't provided with food by the prison, they depended on the generosity of those on the outside to bring it to them. Kyrilla made sure that Paul was fed by sending a sack of food and a jug of wine daily. When Onesimus had entered the house in the morning, Kyrilla had asked him to bring Paul his supplies for the day. Onesimus didn't relish the thought of returning to the prison, but he also knew that one didn't challenge Kyrilla and the way she ran the home.

Unlike his other visits to the prison, he wasn't accompanied by anyone else. He had been surprised when Demas informed him he would go alone but was happy for the solitude. Demas had told him that he was to deliver the food to Paul, report about what happened at the meeting the night before, and then return back to the house. Demas had also given him a small amount of money. "It's possible Paul will ask you to purchase some things at the market," he told Onesimus.

Although he didn't mention it, Onesimus wondered at Demas's confidence that he wouldn't flee. It would be very easy for him to slip down to the harbor and find a ship bound for Rome, Alexandria, or any number of large cities where he could disappear forever. Demas probably figured he couldn't afford that type of escape with the small amount of money he had given him this morning. Onesimus did still

have the money he had stolen from Philemon, but it was not with him. He had hidden it just outside Ephesus the evening before he entered the city for the first time. He reasoned that if anyone suspected he was a fugitive, the presence of such a large sum of money would only confirm their suspicion. Besides, he didn't want to risk losing it or being robbed. So until he could find an opportunity to slip out of the city and retrieve the money, he was stuck in Ephesus. As he made his way to the prison, he considered the irony of the situation. That which he stole to help him become free had made him a prisoner in Ephesus.

As he approached the prison, he hoped he wouldn't see Tiro. The encounter at the meeting the other night was enough. While he believed that Demas, Kyrilla, and the others wouldn't hand him over to the authorities, he was not sure about Tiro. There were many reasons for Tiro to reveal his secret. First and most importantly, at least from Tiro's perspective, was that he could lose his job as prison manager for failing to report a fugitive. Added to that was the loss in status for knowingly helping a runaway slave. The loss of position and status would ruin him, not to mention the fines and possible prison time.

Onesimus stepped into the prison yard and looked around. He didn't see Tiro anywhere. Breathing a sigh of relief, he walked toward the building where Paul was being held. The guards didn't try to stop or speak to him, since they all recognized him from his previous visits. Stepping into the building, he was met by Eutyches and two other guards. Onesimus thought about greeting him and mentioning something about the meeting the other night. But he thought better of it when he remembered Eutyches's explanation that he and Tiro were careful not to dispense with the proper decorum when at the prison together. Instead, he followed one of the guards back to Paul's room and waited as the door was unlocked.

Paul greeted Onesimus warmly as he entered the room and thanked the guard for bringing the visitor to him. He opened Kyrilla's sack, which Onesimus had placed on the table, and began unpacking the contents. "May the Lord bless Kyrilla," Paul said. "She is a faithful slave of the Lord. She always makes sure that I am cared for."

Onesimus was taken aback to hear Paul refer to Kyrilla as a "slave of the Lord." He thought it odd to refer to a free woman, and one with a moderate level of social standing at that, as a slave. But he also remembered the unusual way that Eutyches had called the other Christians "brother and sister."

"So," Paul asked, "how was the meeting? What did you discuss?"

"It was different from anything I've experienced before," Onesimus answered. "I am unaccustomed to people disregarding their place in

society in order to meet and eat together. But probably the most surprising part of the night was seeing Tiro there and meeting Eutyches.”

“Why was that surprising to you? Did you not think that a prison manager and one of his guards could be followers of Jesus?” Paul asked.

“No, what was more surprising is the way Tiro and the others treated Eutyches. They referred to him as brother and greeted him with a hug and a kiss. Everyone acted as if he were their equal, even Tiro, his master.”

Slavery Metaphors

While slaves were ubiquitous in the Greco-Roman world, identifying as a slave when one was not was far less common. Modern readers of the Bible are accustomed to thinking about people as slaves of God or slaves of Christ. But this would not have been a common way of thinking for ancient readers. The division between slave and free meant that few would want to identify themselves as a slave, even if only metaphorically.

Outside Jewish and Christian circles, the concept of slavery to God was rare. When it did occur, the metaphor functioned on a more specific individual basis, rather than for an entire community, as it did for ancient Israel and the early church. In most other references, the idea of slavery to God refers to actual temple slavery rather than a relational metaphor.

In the New Testament the metaphor proves difficult to interpret because it has a complex association with the institution of slavery. The same terminology used to address slaves and masters is used to articulate theology. Indeed, Paul uses slavery language more often when discussing theology than in actually addressing the institution of slavery. These metaphors and Paul’s self-designation as “slave of Christ,” in particular, are typically interpreted against one of two backgrounds: (1) the language was borrowed by Paul from stories about the patriarchs, Moses, David, and the prophets, who were sometimes called “slaves of God”; or (2) it is a symbolic adoption taken from Greco-Roman slavery and illustrates that Paul and other believers were in a slave-like relationship with Christ.

Regardless of which background one chooses for interpreting the metaphor, it must be acknowledged that phrases such as “slave of Christ” would have been curious to

slaves and potentially offensive to the free. How, for instance, would slaves have heard Paul's words in [Philippians 2:7](#) differently from free persons, and how would this have affected the relationship between these two groups? Did the two groups endow it with the same meaning? Although Paul didn't mean for [Philippians 2:7](#) to be a commentary on the institution of slavery, it would still have been heard within the context of a slave's social reality. The slavery metaphor could have advanced a message to the enslaved that their opposition to the institution was hopeless. Moreover, Christ being held up as the ideal slave could have strengthened the institution rather than diminish it, since his voluntary enslavement stands in sharp contrast to those who were enslaved involuntarily. Thus, when reading these metaphors we should keep in mind that in the context of a society where slavery was common, such as the Roman Empire or the antebellum United States, the words would have taken on significantly different meaning for those who were slaves.

"All of us who follow Jesus consider one another family, Onesimus. We are the body of Christ. Once we have committed to following him and seal that commitment through baptism, we are inextricably bound together. Everyone you met last night, the men and the women, the merchants, the laborers, the Jews, all of us are part of the body of Christ, including slaves like Eutyches. While we hold many different positions in society, in Christ those differences dissolve, and we stand as equals before God."

Onesimus sat silently, considering Paul's words before continuing. "We heard a story last night," he said finally. "It was a story about how Jesus healed a Roman soldier's slave."

"Yes, Luke has shared the story with me recently as well," Paul responded.

"I was struck by how Jesus considered a slave important enough to heal him—from a distance even! This god treats both slave and free equally. I believe the Stoics would appreciate the story."

Paul paused. "Onesimus, will you tell me how the meetings were in Colossae, the ones in Philemon's home?"

Onesimus thought for a moment and then began. "In many ways it was the same, but in other ways different. As with last night, there were a variety of people present in the meeting from a variety of social statuses. But I am unsure how they interact in that space since I am usually preparing the food. So I've never witnessed the kind of greetings that are given, and do I not know whether they sit according to their status in the meeting or mingle together as we did last night at

Demas's house. But I suspect that they carefully maintain their social distinctions."

"Why do you think that?" Paul inquired.

"The only interaction I have with the group is when we serve the meal. It's unlike the meal we shared last night in Demas's home. Philemon's house is more spacious and includes a dining area. When I bring the food to the guests, they are seated around the table according to their social status. I begin serving those most worthy first and then move on from there."

"Is the food the same?" Paul asked.

"Oh, yes, everyone eats the same food. It's their position that is different."

"And the slaves of the guests? Where do they sit?"

"In the wings of the atrium, along with the rest of us. We're close enough if needed, but we don't participate in the meeting or the meal. Last night was very different from what I have witnessed in the past."

Paul sat in silence for a while and then said, "Onesimus, I realize that last night was a new experience for you, but what you have witnessed in Philemon's home is not how believers interact with one another in other cities. What you saw in Demas and Kyrilla's home is what it truly means to be one in Christ, baptized into his body.

"I wrote a letter recently to a group of believers in Corinth," he continued. "There the slaves attend the meeting. They are there when the songs are sung, when stories about Jesus are recalled, when the Scriptures are read, and when the meal is eaten. When I baptized the household of Stephanas, it included his slaves. But there are some there who, like yourself, are concerned with their status as a slave. They have heard me say, as I told you, that in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, no slave or free. So naturally some of them are wondering why they should continue to live as a slave when both they and their master are followers of Jesus. If they are neither slave nor free in Christ, why not also in the home?"

"What did you tell them?" Onesimus asked.

"I told them not to worry about it," Paul responded. "I told them that if God called them to salvation while they were a slave then they shouldn't let it concern them. Thus, just as Jews called by Christ shouldn't seek to become Gentiles so too slaves should not be exerting effort to become free."

It was evident by the look on his face that Onesimus wasn't happy with this piece of advice.

"In Christ," Paul continued, "those who were free when called by God are now Christ's slaves, while those who were called while slaves are Christ's freedmen. They stand equally before God, much like the Stoic philosophy you like to quote. However, I also told them that

should the opportunity to be free be presented to them, they should avail themselves of it.”

Use Slavery or Freedom?

First Corinthians 7:21 has the distinction of being one of the more difficult passages to translate and interpret. While modern translations tend to be quite clear, the Greek is not. In [1 Corinthians 7:21](#) Paul says, “Were you a slave when called? Do not worry about it. But if you are able to become free rather use . . .” (my translation).

Translators and interpreters have asked the same question for centuries: Use what? Paul seems to have left his thoughts incomplete. Did he mean that slaves who had become Christians should use their *slavery*? Should they refuse the chance to become free? Or did he mean slaves should use their *freedom*?

Needless to say, there has been quite a debate over this verse, and English translations reflect the divided opinions over how to complete Paul’s elliptical sentence. Some think his advice to slaves is to remain in slavery, while others believe he is telling them to take freedom. During the nineteenth century, the ambiguity surrounding this verse often made it a central focus for both sides of the slavery/abolitionism debates. In the first part of the twentieth century, many translations concluded Paul was advising slaves not to accept freedom. More recently, however, more have argued in favor of completing the sentence with “take freedom.”

If there is an explanation for the current consensus of the “use freedom” interpretation, it may be credited to a better understanding of slavery in antiquity and the conventions of ancient rhetoric. Still, one has to wonder what the history of slavery may have looked like had Paul merely finished his thoughts and included the word *freedom* or *slavery*.

“In other words,” said Onesimus, “you wouldn’t recommend that a slave seek freedom by fleeing from his master but rather wait for the master to offer it to him.”

“Exactly,” said Paul.

“But what about those situations when the master is excessively cruel and the slave’s life might be in danger? What then should be the response?” Onesimus asked.

“My answer would be first and foremost directed to the master. I would remind that master that as Christ’s slave they too have a master

who lives in heaven. And that just as they want to be treated justly and fairly by their master, they should treat their slaves the same way.”

“And if that master doesn’t act this way,” Onesimus pressed, “what then?”

“Then I suppose that those are the situations when someone like myself must step between them and work to bring about reconciliation. That is what I believe must happen, and it is what I intend to happen between you and Philemon. I acknowledge that the situation under Philemon is difficult. And I’m disappointed he has not done a better job at refreshing the hearts of everyone in his household, including you.

“I know you believe that the reason you fled is his cruelty and your desire to be free. But I believe that all of this has occurred by the hand of God. God has something to teach all of us in this situation, and I believe that once you surrender to God, the reconciliation between you and your master will be the next step.”

“Now, then,” said the apostle, changing topics before Onesimus could respond. “Next time you return I would like for you to pick me up some sheets of papyri in the marketplace. I have some more writing to do to the church in Corinth, and I would appreciate you bringing me whatever you can find.”

Paul then called for the guard to allow Onesimus to exit, which was the signal that the day’s interview was over. Onesimus arose and walked through the door and out into the prison yard. As he departed, he observed the irony of the situation. The freeborn man he’d just left was being constrained in a prison. Yet the one born a slave was free to come and go. Onesimus wondered whether it was this sort of paradox Paul had in mind when he wrote to Corinth about being free or enslaved in Christ.

LAODICEA

The Decision

NYMPHA WAS GREETED BY TWO SLAVES as she entered the house. One took the sack she was carrying, while the other helped her remove her cloak.

“Where is Magnus?” she asked.

“He is still in the *taberna* taking inventory, mistress,” one of the slaves answered, pointing in that direction. “Shall I bring him to you?”

“No, I will go to him. Thank you.”

Nympha picked up the sack and walked toward the work rooms. She’d made a decision and needed to inform Magnus immediately.

The events of the last week had given her much to think about, and the meeting at Colossae had left her rethinking the place of slaves in the church. Although she hadn’t been taken aback by the way Archippus switched places with the freedman, she had been when he had Calmus sit among the believers.

She had discussed the situation later with Apphia and confirmed what she already knew. Slaves were not part of the church meeting in Colossae. Nonetheless, Apphia admitted a certain level of openness to having at least the baptized slaves participating in the meeting. But she couldn’t conceive them being present at the meal too. “Who would serve the food and care for the guests?” she wondered aloud. “Archippus’s stories and ideas are certainly stimulating, but they don’t take into consideration how one continues to run a household when the slaves aren’t there to work. I can’t imagine Philemon would ever concede to the slaves eating with us.”

Apphia’s comments caused Nympha to reconsider Archippus’s request. Before going to Colossae, she had been ready to invite Magnus and the other slaves to participate in the next meeting at her home. But she hadn’t thought about who would care for the guests and serve the food. Moreover, she began to think of some of the same

anxieties voiced by her late husband, Manilus.

What if it became known that my slaves weren't caring for my guests? she thought. *Would people think I couldn't run a household? How might this impact my business dealings? I've worked too hard to prove a woman can run both a household and a successful business!*

Those ruminations had led to her decision.

She entered one of the *tabernae* and found Magnus in front of the shelves, scratching notes on a wax tablet. He turned to see Nympha and bowed slightly to her.

"Greetings, mistress. I didn't know you were home."

"I've only just returned. Here are the items you said we needed this morning," she said, placing them on the table.

"Thank you. We should be able to finish the day's orders with them," Magnus replied.

"There is something I need to talk to you about," Nympha began.

"Is there a problem?" he said as he laid the wax tablet on the table.

"Has something happened that displeased you?"

"No, you are a more-than-capable household manager. I have no complaints about the way you run my home."

The slave looked a bit more at ease—until Nympha uttered her next words. "I want to talk about your conversation with Archippus and the invitation he extended to you."

"It was he, who spoke to me first, mistress, I swear. I made no requests of him. Whatever he told you was from him and him only," Magnus blurted out. "I made it clear to him in as respectful a way as possible that what he was suggesting was inappropriate."

"Be at ease, Magnus, you've done nothing wrong. You still have my trust and confidence. Archippus told me that it was he who approached you, and he emphasized that although the proposal was his, the final decision rested with me."

"So what is it you would like to discuss then?" the now-confused slave asked.

"I have considered Archippus's suggestion and reached a decision," she replied. "You will not be attending the next meeting of the church in my home."

"That is fine, mistress. I thought it an unwise suggestion on his part," answered Magnus, with as much criticism of Archippus as he dared.

"I don't think we are quite ready for the presence of a slave at a meeting in Laodicea, and I am not sure how I could manage if my household manager were acting like a guest."

"I believe your decision is wise, mistress."

"Good. I am glad to hear it. And I hope you think the rest of my decision to also be wise and easy to follow."

Magnus looked at her as she paused. "At the end of the week you will accompany me to my cousin's home in Colossae and attend a meeting of the church there," she finally said.

"But why?" Magnus asked.

"For several reasons. First, Archippus thinks you have an interest in what is said and goes on at our meetings. Is that correct?"

"Yes," Magnus replied with a slightly bowed head.

"Good! Second, although I think Archippus has made a good suggestion, it is not one I am ready to implement here. However, I know that he has convinced my cousin's wife, Apphia, to include slaves in the next meeting of the church. So, while it doesn't reach Archippus's goal of having slaves at the meetings here, it does allow you to experience a meeting in a setting where you won't feel like you should be constantly managing as you would here. Besides, I won't be able to arrive at Colossae until later in the day, and I will need you to accompany me on the trip."

"I would be pleased to do as you ask," the slave replied.

"Excellent," Nymphia answered and turned, leaving the household manager to finish the inventory.

EPHESUS

Discussing the Law

THE GUARDS WERE ACCUSTOMED TO THE MANAGER walking through the prison to inspect the inmates. But the number and length of his visits to Paul's cell were raising eyebrows among some. The prison manager seemed to have an unusual amount of interest in this particular inmate. When Eutyches informed Tiro about the whisperings among the other guards, he knew he needed to limit his interaction with Paul. The situation with Onesimus was consuming more time and energy than Tiro could afford, and he was reaching the limits of whatever help he could and was willing to give. He must convince Paul to act soon before circumstances forced him to hand over Onesimus to the authorities. It was time for the slave to go home or into a prison cell.

Tiro entered the room and behind him Eutyches.

"Peace to you, Brother Eutyches," Paul greeted the slave. "What a pleasure to see you here in my cell. I miss seeing you. Ever since I became Tiro's guest here, you have been almost invisible. Is all well?"

"Peace to you, Paul. I'm sorry for my absence, but considering the circumstances that brought you here, Tiro and I thought it best if both of us not be seen with you. It has not always been easy for us to meet with the brothers and sisters at Demas and Kyrilla's home, and now with Onesimus. . . ." He paused before continuing. "It is becoming more difficult every day to keep from attracting attention."

"Ah, I see Tiro has told you about Onesimus."

The Usefulness and Limitation of Roman Law

One challenging area for interpreters of Philemon and

Onesimus's situation is which sources should be used to inform our understanding of slavery and how we should use them. Throughout this chapter and others, I have quoted excerpts from Roman law. This would be the most obvious resource. But Roman legal texts regulating slavery must be used with caution.

The primary source for Roman law is the *Digest of Justinian* (AD 533). The *Digest* is a compilation of legal decisions from which all obsolete rulings had been excised and only those still relevant in AD 533 were preserved. While some laws in the *Digest* undoubtedly go back to the first century, many may be missing. It is possible other laws existed that did not survive and could shed light on the situation. So, while a picture of the legal situation is very good, it is also inherently incomplete.

At the same time, it is important not to interpret legal texts in a way that makes monolithic claims about Roman slavery. Legal texts are not necessarily positive indicators of social practice. They may offer us a glimpse into social practice, but they are prescriptive, not descriptive. Slavery laws were established in response to situations that required some type of legal control. Whether they actually mirror social practices and attitudes is debatable.

Finally, it is difficult to determine the extent to which Roman laws were fully implemented in Rome's provinces. Roman law applied only to Roman citizens, while non-Romans typically retained their own local rules. Provincial governors applied Roman law as part of their official duties, but how effectively and thoroughly is difficult to answer. Governors were under no compulsion to hear particular cases, and their authority was probably felt more in cities than in rural areas, where local practices are likely to have predominated. This being the case, it would be difficult to determine which, if any, Roman laws applied to the case of Onesimus, who was a slave owned by a man living in Phrygia.

For more information, see the article from which this sidebar is adapted: John Byron, "Paul and the Background of Slavery: The Status Quaestionis in New Testament Scholarship," *Currents in Biblical Research* 3, no. 1 (2004): 116-39.

"I had little choice," Tiro interjected. "With all of the visitors you receive, it was becoming impossible for me to hide the truth about Onesimus any longer. He has no clear business here with you or the

church.”

“I understand, my friend. I am sorry for the trouble I have caused you and the others. Will you be joining us today, Eutyches?”

“No, I will stand guard so as to keep others from listening to your conversation.”

Paul and Tiro sat down across the table from each other as Eutyches closed the door behind him.

“Your face is serious, my friend. I gather you have some news or information to share with me?” Paul guessed.

“Yes. I have been to visit the magistrates and discussed aspects of the law as it relates to fugitive slaves.”

“Excellent, I was hoping we would hear something soon. Were you able to preserve our secret?”

“Well, I had to be cautious not to alert them to the real situation. So I feigned interest in the question based on my experience as a former slave. I told them I was pondering what my life might have been like had fate not changed my status. What if I had fled from slavery, rather than gaining my freedom the way I did? It was a long conversation involving more than one jug of wine,” he said with a sheepish smile.

“And what did you learn?” the apostle asked, pretending not to have heard the last sentence.

“The situation is very simple. You must convince Onesimus to return home immediately or hand him over to the magistrates. The law is quite clear on the matter, Paul. A slave has few rights to begin with. But he has even less when he has committed the crime of stealing himself.”

Paul sat silently for a few moments, allowing Tiro’s words to sink in before responding. “And how soon is ‘immediately’?”

Tiro was ready with a full answer. “According to the law, anyone discovering a fugitive slave hiding on his property has twenty days to hand him over to the authorities before standing in violation of the law. Anyone found intentionally hiding a runaway, as we are doing, is guilty of being a thief.”

Paul tried to interject a comment, but Tiro wasn’t yet ready to yield the floor and kept talking.

“What’s more, as the manager of this prison, and the public slaves that work here, I am required to take Onesimus in to custody and notify the local magistrates.”

“But what about the fact that he is here with Demas and the church?” Paul interjected. “Couldn’t we argue that he is in the company of his master’s friends? Masters frequently send slaves on long-distance errands to attend to business or to bring a gift or a letter to a friend. Many of us in Ephesus know Philemon or at least his

reputation in the Lycus Valley. Do we not count as friends? Could we not bear some of the blame for keeping him here with us?”

“That would be a very creative way of describing the situation,” Tiro responded. “If I remember correctly, you described Onesimus’s situation somewhat ambiguously as being ‘separated’ from Philemon.”

“Yes, that is how I view the status of their relationship. It is not unlike when a slave takes to roaming or wandering off without explicit permission. While the master doesn’t know the slave’s whereabouts, he isn’t concerned that the slave has absconded, since he knows that eventually he will return home. In the end, it is a temporary separation, and no harm is done.”

“Perhaps, but Onesimus is not merely an errant or wandering slave. Granted, the law does make allowances for those who frequently wander and piddle about when sent on errands by their master. And you are correct, that although these slaves are frequently tardy when returning home, they are not classified as fugitives. However, a slave is not declared a fugitive based merely on his location or the distance between him and the master. The definition is based on the slave’s intent. For instance, if a slave were to hide somewhere in his master’s home, waiting until everyone had gone to sleep before escaping, even though he hasn’t yet fled, he is still considered a fugitive. Whether he has already stolen himself from the home or not is not as relevant as his intent.”

Tiro continued, “Similarly, if that same slave hid in the house, not intending to flee, but to prevent his master from beating him, he is not a fugitive. In this case, the slave who waits until the master’s temper abates before reappearing is merely saving himself. In the end, the law considers a slave a fugitive when he remains away from the master’s house with the purpose of flight in mind. And since Onesimus confessed to us his harebrained scheme to flee to Rome and study Stoicism, I see no other way to classify him other than as a fugitive subject to all the restrictions and penalties outlined in the law.”

“So there is no alternative, then?” Paul asked, finally finding an opportunity to respond.

Androcles and the Lion

“Androcles and the Lion” is a well-known story from antiquity. It has been attributed to many authors, including Aesop. Although a fable, the version below is particularly interesting because it includes an account of why Androcles originally fled his master.

A slave ran away from his master, by whom he had been most cruelly treated, and, in order to avoid

capture, betook himself into the desert. As he wandered about in search of food and shelter, he came to a cave, which he entered and found to be unoccupied. Really, however, it was a lion's den, and almost immediately, to the horror of the wretched fugitive, the lion himself appeared. The man gave himself up for lost. But, to his utter astonishment, the lion, instead of springing upon him, came and fawned upon him, at the same time whining and lifting up his paw. Observing it to be much swollen and inflamed, he examined it and found a large thorn embedded in the ball of the foot. He accordingly removed it and dressed the wound as well as he could. And in course of time it healed up completely.

The lion's gratitude was unbounded. He looked upon the man as his friend, and they shared the cave for some time together. A day came, however, when the slave began to long for the society of his fellow men, and he bade farewell to the lion and returned to the town. Here he was presently recognized and carried off in chains to his former master, who resolved to make an example of him, and ordered that he should be thrown to the beasts at the next public spectacle in the theater.

On the fatal day the beasts were loosed into the arena, and among the rest a lion of huge bulk and ferocious aspect. And then the wretched slave was cast in among them. What was the amazement of the spectators, when the lion after one glance bounded up to him and lay down at his feet with every expression of affection and delight! It was his old friend of the cave! The audience clamored that the slave's life should be spared. And the governor of the town, marveling at such gratitude and fidelity in a beast, decreed that both should receive their liberty. (*Aesop's Fables*, trans. V. S. Vernon Jones [London: W. Heinemann, 1912], 31-32)

"No, the owner's power is absolute. Even if Onesimus decided that the possibility of death might be better than the punishment he could face if he returned to Philemon, and so he chose to volunteer for the arena to fight man or beast, he could not escape Philemon's control. In that case, regardless of whether his real status was discovered before or after the fight, he would be returned to Philemon."

"Ah, but that is not always the case," Paul answered.

“How so?” Tiro queried.

“I once heard a story about a slave. I think it was during the reign of Caligula. A slave, recaptured after running away from his master, was sentenced to be mauled by a lion in the Circus Maximus in Rome. But when he was led into the circus to face the lion, a strange thing happened. The lion recognized the slave as an old companion. Apparently the slave had once removed a painful thorn or splinter from the lion’s paw and in the process had made a friend. Rather than a bloody battle between man and beast, the crowd witnessed an altogether different sight. The lion and the slave embraced each other in joy, both having been reunited by fate in the Circus Maximus on the same day. By popular demand of the crowd, the slave was pardoned and granted the lion. In that case, Tiro, the slave was able to overcome the law.”

Tiro breathed out an exasperated sigh. “Paul, you know full well that is a fable used by philosophers to describe the power of friendship and told by parents to children as a bedtime story. It has no bearing on the current situation.”

“Yes, I know. But it is a lovely story. In any case, I would like to find a way to keep him a little longer,” Paul said. “I have come to enjoy his company, and I believe he is ready to turn to God and the Lord Jesus, if I could have just a bit more time. A few weeks, perhaps?”

Tiro was prepared for this question as well. But rather than reply with a well-researched answer, he reached into his cloak and pulled out a sheet of rolled papyrus.

“This was sent to me here at the prison,” he said, handing it to Paul.

“What is it?”

“Open it and see for yourself.”

Paul untied the leather thong, opened the roll, and began reading. It was the wanted poster created by Stephanus of Laodicea.

“A hundred and eighty denarii?” he breathed. “My, that is quite a lot of money. And I suspect our shrewd runaway has been careful to hide the money, probably someplace outside the city. He certainly hasn’t mentioned this detail to me or Demas. I suppose his harebrained scheme, as you call it, wasn’t so foolish after all. With this kind of money he could sail to Rome and study Stoicism for years. Of course, sooner or later someone would wonder where he got so much money.”

Paul sat reading the wanted poster over several times before he spoke again. “Well, I suppose this settles it then,” he said. “He needs to go home.”

Tiro was visibly relieved. “This is excellent news, Paul. I will let

Demas know immediately.”

Paul grabbed Tiro’s arm as the prison manager began to get up from the table. “But not today,” he said, looking squarely at Tiro. “He needs to go home, but not today. I need one more visit with him first.”

Tiro dropped into his seat and held his head in his hands.

“Paul, Paul, Paul,” he muttered half to himself and half to the apostle. “I cannot continue harboring a runaway in my prison. If he is going to be in this prison, he must be an inmate not a visitor.” He was more pleading than declaring.

“I understand, Tiro. But I need just one more visit with him. I need to prepare him for the journey home and what he will encounter when he arrives. I need you to help me help him.”

“You read the poster,” Tiro complained. “Look at the description. It matches Onesimus perfectly. Anyone seeing this poster and him visiting you will soon realize what’s going on here. Luckily, most of the guards can’t read. But they are already becoming suspicious about the amount of time I spend with you. Why do you think Eutyches is standing guard today? Time has run out, Paul. We must act. Either send him home, or I will arrest him.”

“I need just one more visit,” the apostle replied, holding up one finger to emphasize what he was asking for.

“Argh!” Tiro cried out in frustration. “Listen to me. It’s obvious Stephanus suspects Onesimus may be hiding somewhere in Ephesus. The arrival of the poster probably means he has also sent slave catchers here with letters to the local magistrates requesting they be allowed to search the property of those whom they suspect are harboring a runaway. If they think Onesimus is in Demas’s house or see him going into this prison . . . we must hand Onesimus over immediately or risk being fined, arrested, or both. Do you realize how hard it will be for me to conceal Onesimus from the slave catchers if they question the prison guards? No, he must leave here immediately.”

The two men sat in silence for a few moments, Tiro once again cradling his head in his hands. After what seemed like forever, Paul broke the silence.

“Let me see Onesimus one more time. I promise you I will send him home. If he refuses, I will allow you to arrest him.”

Tiro sat there, staring at Paul with a look of disbelief on his face. It was clear Paul wasn’t going to back down until he had won.

Tiro suddenly got up from the table and began pacing back and forth across the room. “Okay,” he said, waving his arms as he spoke, “okay, you win. One more visit. But only on three conditions.”

“Whatever you ask,” replied Paul.

“First, he will come here at night, when he is less likely to be

seen.”

“Agreed.”

“Second, he will be escorted in and out of the prison by Eutyches, who will also stand guard. If, once you inform him of the decision, he tries to escape, Eutyches will imprison him immediately, and I will inform the magistrates.”

“Agreed. And your third stipulation?”

“He leaves here that night. Not the next day. Not the next week. He leaves that night. No returning to Demas’s home. He leaves for Colossae immediately. And we find someone we trust who will accompany him to Colossae to make sure he does return to Philemon.”

Paul waited before responding, considering the third stipulation.

“Agreed. I will send him home with Tychicus. He has been with Onesimus from the beginning. He knows Philemon and is well acquainted with the churches in the valley. And I think we can both agree that he is a trustworthy individual.”

Tiro stopped pacing. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Paul had agreed to everything.

“Very well, then. We have an agreement. I will bring him here tonight, and we can be done with this matter,” Tiro said with relief.

“Two nights from now,” Paul responded.

“What?”

“I need some time to think through the situation one last time and determine how I can best bring about reconciliation between slave and master. In the meantime, Onesimus can attend one more meeting of the church in Demas’s house.”

Tiro wanted to object and insist Onesimus leave that very night, but he thought better. Paul’s promise of two nights from now would have to suffice. Besides, he didn’t want Paul talking him into anything else.

“Agreed, two nights from now. But no longer than that, and no visits in between.”

“Agreed, brother.” Paul said as he got up, embraced Tiro, and walked him over to the door. “In the meantime, I will need some papyrus sheets so I can prepare for his departure.”

“I will have Eutyches bring them to you in the morning.”

“And I will need to see Timothy,” Paul continued. “He has recently returned from visiting the church in Corinth on his way back from Thessalonica. I need to debrief with him. And I would like his assistance drafting a letter.”

“I will let Demas know to send Timothy here in the morning.”

As Tiro was walking out the open door Paul said to him, “Thank you, Tiro. I consider myself in your debt.”

EPHESUS

The Letter

EUTYCHES HELD THE DOOR AS ONESIMUS and Tychicus entered the cell. Onesimus's entrance was far different from the first day he met Paul accompanied by Demas. The anxious, hunted look of an animal had since faded, replaced by a calmer, more assured look. He'd visited the prison enough times recently that he no longer betrayed any fear of being locked up permanently.

Paul welcomed each of them with a smile and a hug. The group chatted for a few moments about the recent meeting at Demas's home. They told him how Timothy reported about his recent visits to Macedonia and Corinth and what God was doing among the churches there.

When the conversation came to a natural lull, Paul asked to speak with Onesimus alone. On cue, Eutyches and Tychicus exited the room, leaving slave and apostle alone to talk.

"You seem to have enjoyed your time in Demas's home," Paul began while taking a seat.

"Yes," he answered. "And I've appreciated getting to know the Christians here in Ephesus. Although the meetings are similar to those I witnessed in Colossae, the people who attend them are very different."

"In what way?"

"Well, the Christians in Colossae would never allow a slave to attend the meal or join them during worship and prayer. I think I told you that, at Philemon's house, slaves are there to serve the meal and nothing more."

"Yes, you did tell me that. And I remain most disappointed about it. I am glad you've had the chance to experience the fellowship of the believers here the way it should be. I believe I told you that in Corinth slave and master both eat and worship together?"

“Yes, you did. And had I not experienced it here in Ephesus, I would not have believed you.” He paused as if lost in thought and then said, “It is everything I had imagined I would find as a Stoic.”

Paul allowed the silence to linger for a few moments, waiting for Onesimus to continue. The slave was deep in thought.

“I’ve learned so much in my short time here. I thought Stoicism offered me a path to freedom. And perhaps it does in a way. But I think now that maybe the God of the Jews and his son Jesus offer freedom and much more.”

“How so?” the apostle prodded.

“The Stoics in Hierapolis talked about the *Logos*, the divine force that is part of and holds the entire universe together. They said that we had a kinship with the divine because of our common existence in the cosmos. But the Jewish God seems to be so much more than that. He is said to be powerful and personal, and he acts on behalf of his people. I’ve learned how this God parted waters for his people and fed them with bread from heaven. He made their armies victorious in battle and healed them when they were diseased.”

“And what about Jesus?” Paul asked. “What have you discovered about him?”

Onesimus looked up. “He is like no human being I have known. When I heard how he healed the centurion’s slave, I knew he was not like other teachers. He is full of wisdom, but he is also full of love and grace.”

“Some of us would call him the *Logos* that your Stoic friends describe as the power of the universe,” Paul responded. “We believe he is God in flesh.”

“Yes, I see that now.” Onesimus answered. “And when I learned about his resurrection from the dead, it gave me such hope. In Hierapolis they talked about the cycle of the cosmos and our existence within it. But Jesus’ resurrection and defeat of death seems to be a promise of life. It is so much more than anything Stoicism may espouse.” Again there was silence.

“I have made a decision, Paul,” Onesimus said after a pause.

“And what is your decision?”

“I want to be a follower of Jesus and join the church. I am going to ask Demas to baptize me the next time we gather together,” he said resolutely.

“That is a fine idea,” Paul answered warmly. “But I am afraid it won’t be possible.”

Onesimus looked stunned. “But why? I thought you would want this for me!”

“Don’t misunderstand me,” Paul answered. “I am quite pleased you have made this decision. And I would love nothing more than to be

there with you, perhaps even baptize you myself. But you must go home.”

Onesimus couldn't believe what he was hearing. He was ready to protest, but then Paul reached into his tunic and pulled out a piece of rolled papyrus. Holding it toward the slave, he asked, “Do you read?”

Onesimus shook his head and whispered a barely audible, “No.”

“It is a wanted poster,” Paul explained. “Your wanted poster.”

The slave quietly stared across the table as Paul unrolled the papyrus and began reading it aloud. Onesimus's countenance fell as he heard his name read and his defining features so accurately described. Philemon may not have given much personal attention to his slaves, but he had carefully observed everything necessary for singling out a fugitive.

Paul paused after reading the amount reportedly stolen and looked at Onesimus. The slave's shoulders slumped under the apostle's gaze and the realization that the full scope of his crimes had been revealed. Not only was he a fugitive, but he was also a thief.

He raised his eyebrows when he heard Paul read the reward offered and the mention of Stephanus's name. It was clear he had no choice. The slave catchers were already in the city, and it was only a matter of time before someone recognized him. It was time to go home.

“When?” Onesimus whispered.

“Tonight,” Paul replied. “I've asked Tychicus to accompany you to Colossae. Once it's dark you should be able to exit the prison and Ephesus to begin the trip home. Tychicus has been to the Lycus Valley many times and will help keep you from danger.”

“But what about Tychicus? If we are found, they will surely arrest him as well as me.”

“That is a possibility,” Paul admitted. “But I think I have taken care of that problem.”

“How?”

“Tychicus will be carrying a letter written and sealed by Tiro.”

Onesimus scowled when he heard the prison manager's name.

“Don't make faces, my friend,” Paul warned. “If it weren't for our brother Tiro, you would be sitting in a cell deep inside this prison waiting for the slave catchers to lead you home. It was Tiro who gave the poster to me and helped devise a plan to send you home. I realize he's not been as welcoming to you as the other brothers and sisters in Ephesus, but he has taken as much risk as the rest of us to protect you.”

“What does the letter say?” Onesimus asked resignedly.

“It indicates that you have been in Ephesus with friends of your master. Since we detained you longer than was proper, we thought it

best to send you home with Tychicus to help explain your overdue return. Coming from the prison manager, the letter will hopefully provide you safe passage. In reality, Tiro should throw you in prison, notify the slave catchers, and send word to Philemon.”

Onesimus released a heavy sigh. “And what,” he wondered aloud, “will happen to me when I return? Philemon will certainly punish me, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he decided to sell me.”

“That is his right as your owner,” Paul answered. “I know he can be a difficult slave master. But I suspect that he will be hesitant to mistreat a fellow brother in Christ.”

Onesimus looked quizzically at Paul. “Why would he consider me a brother? He never has before.”

“True, but when you return home you will be. And,” he said while reaching into his tunic and producing a second roll of papyrus, “you will be carrying a letter saying that you are not the same person you once were. Indeed, you might even say, I am introducing a completely different person to Philemon for the very first time.” He said this with a smile. Onesimus was still puzzled.

“I think you will enjoy what this has to say more than the other one,” he explained as he unrolled and began to read the papyrus sheet to the slave.

Onesimus listened intently as Paul read the letter to his master. He anticipated an appeal to Philemon that would help him avoid any punishment. But there was none of that. In fact, the letter was quite vague. The only clear allusion to the true nature of Onesimus’s situation was an oblique mention of a “separation” between slave and master. Paul didn’t say anything about Onesimus being a runaway, nor did he specifically mention the money he had stolen. Indeed, if one didn’t know the details behind the letter, they would think this was merely a letter between two old friends in which one was encouraging the other to reconsider his treatment of a fellow brother in Christ.

When Paul had finished he set the papyrus sheet on the table, allowing it to roll itself up again.

Letters of Mediation in Antiquity

The letter to Philemon is the most personal of Paul’s letters. Yet, while it may stand out in the New Testament, this type of mediation letter was not unusual in antiquity. The intention of these types of letters was to attempt the reconciliation of a broken relationship or to petition someone in authority.

Frequently a third party was in some type of trouble and had asked the author to serve as a mediator between himself and the recipient. The third party anticipated that the positive relationship between the author and recipient would help to restore him to a positive relationship.

An excellent example of this type of mediation is a letter Pliny the Younger wrote to his friend Sabinianus, which has often been compared to Paul's letter to Philemon.

Your freedman with whom you said you were angry has been with me; he threw himself at my feet and clung to me with as much submission as he could have done at yours. He earnestly requested me with many tears, and even with all the eloquence of silent sorrow, to intercede for him; in short he convinced me by his whole behavior, that he sincerely repents of his fault. And I am persuaded he is thoroughly reformed, because he knows that he was wrong.

I know you are angry with him, and I know too, it is not without reason; but mercy is never more worthy of praise than where there is the just cause for anger. You once loved this man, and, I hope, will again: in the meanwhile, let me only prevail with you to pardon him. If he should incur your displeasure hereafter, you will have so much the stronger a reason for your anger, as you show yourself willing to forgive him now. Allow something to his youth, to his tears, and to your own gentle disposition: do not make yourself so; for a man of your kindness of heart cannot be angry without feeling great uneasiness.

I am afraid that if I add my prayers to his, I would seem to be compelling you rather than asking you to forgive him. Yet I will do it and in the strongest terms since I have rebuked him very sharply and severely, warning him that I will never intercede for him again. Although it was proper for me to say this to him, in order to frighten him, it was not intended for your hearing. I may possibly have the occasion to again intercede for him and obtain forgiveness if the error is one which is suitable for my intercession and your pardon. (Pliny, *Letters and Panegyricus*, trans. Betty Rice, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976])

While some of the particulars are different between Pliny

and Paul, both letters are a striking effort to try to restore the broken relationship between a slave or former slave and his master. Unlike the book of Philemon, Pliny's letter seems to be based on the slave's or freedman's right to seek a mediator between himself and the master should the situation warrant such. Nonetheless, New Testament scholars often compare these two as letters of mediation.

"You told him to receive me as beloved brother," Onesimus said. "How can one be both a slave and a beloved brother at the same time?"

"Actually, it was you who gave me the idea," Paul responded.

"What could I possibly have said or did that led you to this conclusion?"

"It was when you told me what you heard from the Stoic preacher in Hierapolis: 'Kindly remember that he whom you call your slave sprang from the same stock as you.' Those words reminded me of the advice of another ancient philosopher who, like our Lord, was a Jew and, curiously enough, named Jesus. Jesus Ben Sira was a sage from Jerusalem who later moved to Alexandria and established a school there. He wrote many lines of wisdom for his people. And among them he commented on how we should treat slaves. He suggested that a slave without enough work to keep him busy will only end up in trouble. And he does advise that a disobedient slave should be punished and beaten when necessary."

The more Paul talked, the more Onesimus wondered how this Jewish philosopher could possibly be of any help in this situation. Indeed, he was hoping Philemon hadn't read him.

"But he does offer some advice that reminded me of the Stoics," Paul said. "'If you have but one slave, treat him like yourself, because you have bought him with blood.' But he takes it one step further by also suggesting, 'If you have but one slave, treat him like a brother, for you will need him as you need your life.'"

"You see, Onesimus," Paul said, looking squarely at him. "It is possible for slave and master to live as brothers. And how much more so when slave and master are both followers of the same God?"

Paul paused, allowing his words to hang in the air.

Slavery Among Jews

Slavery was practiced by Jews in much the same way as it was among Gentiles. That slavery was an accepted fact is evidenced by the numerous parables in which Jesus includes slaves as major characters. In the Jewish writer Josephus,

slavery among Jews is portrayed as acceptable. Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.21) and Philo (*That Every Good Person Is Free* 12) both claim that Essenes did not own slaves, but this does not suggest a general attitude of abolition among most Jews. The Wisdom of Ben Sira 33:24-33 speaks about treatment of slaves. In this, story Paul quotes [Wisdom 33:31](#).

The Old Testament outlined numerous law codes governing slaves, and was careful to differentiate between Hebrew and foreign-born slaves. However, it is not clear to what extent Jews were still following those codes by the first century. One major distinction was that slaves brought into a Jewish household were often circumcised until this practice was outlawed by Roman decree in the third and fourth centuries. But except for this, there was little difference between Jews and non-Jews and the way they practiced slavery.

“I may not be able to ask Philemon to grant you your freedom. But I can encourage him to treat you as he does all of the other brothers and sisters in Colossae who worship in his home. You are one of us now, Onesimus. You are a member of the body of Christ.”

Apostle and slave sat in silence for several minutes while Onesimus, deep in thought, reflected on the situation and what he might face upon returning home. Finally the sounds of the prison on the other side of the door brought Onesimus back to the present.

He looked straight at Paul and stated baldly, “I will return, but I want to be baptized first.”

“It’s too risky,” Paul responded, shaking his head. “If Demas was seen baptizing you in the River Cayster, the entire church in Ephesus would be in jeopardy. It will simply have to wait until you return to Colossae, where Tychicus can do it in front of everyone there.”

“I would rather it was you,” Onesimus answered.

Paul was about to respond, but then stopped himself. He turned his head to one side, obviously deep in thought. Then he suddenly got up from the table so quickly that Onesimus gave a small cry. The apostle crossed the room and banged on the door.

“Eutyches? Tychicus? Are you there? Come in here. I need you right away!”

Turning from the door he looked at Onesimus and said with a broad smile, “I think we can arrange your baptism immediately.”

Eutyches entered the room, Tychicus right behind him. The apostle’s shouts and banging had alarmed them. But before they could speak, he was giving orders.

“I need a large jug of water and a bowl brought to me

immediately,” he barked. He began to turn away, but then remembered, “And a towel for drying!”

“I don’t understand,” Eutyches said. “Are you planning to bathe this late in the day?”

“No,” he said, turning toward Onesimus. “We are going to baptize our new brother.”



Onesimus stood at one end of the table. In front of him was a bowl, with Tychicus and Eutyches standing to his left. Paul was on the right, holding a jug of water, with a towel thrown over his shoulder.

Early Baptism Modes and Formulas

The New Testament portrays baptism as submersion under water. But evidence from early Christianity reveals that while submersion was the preferred mode, pouring water over the person was also acceptable. This is demonstrated in an early Christian document known as the Teaching of the Twelve, or Didache in Greek. When discussing how to baptize we read:

Concerning baptism, baptize thus: Having discussed all these things, baptize, in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, in running water.

But if you have no running water, then baptize in some other water, and if you are not able to baptize in cold, then do so in warm.

But if you have neither, then pour water on the head three times in the Name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.

And before the baptism let the baptizing and the one being baptized fast, and anyone else who is able. And you shall command the one who is to be baptized to fast one or two days before.^a

The above quotation reveals that the tripartite baptismal formula, “in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” is also ancient. The Didache seems to reflect the words of Jesus in [Matthew 28:19](#). But the formula Paul uses to baptize Onesimus in this scene was one used in the earliest days of the church, as demonstrated in [Acts 2:38; 4:12; 8:16; 10:48](#).

The scene in which Paul baptizes Onesimus while in prison

is fictional, of course. But based on the evidence we have for early Christian baptism, it's not impossible.

^a"The Didache," trans. J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and revised by Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 7:1-4.

"Brother Onesimus," Paul said solemnly. "We are going to baptize you here, in my prison cell. We are baptizing you as a slave. But when we are done, you will have freedom that no prison cell or enslavement can ever take away from you."

Paul guided the slave over the bowl and slowly tipped the jug. As the water flowed over the slave's head into the bowl and splashed onto the surrounding table, Paul said: "Onesimus, I baptize you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."

When the jug was empty, Onesimus stood up straight, and Paul handed him the towel. When Onesimus finished drying himself, he dropped the towel from his head, revealing a broad smile.

"Welcome to the body of Christ, brother," Paul said. "While you may still be Philemon's slave, you are now Christ's freedman." Then he and Onesimus embraced each other, followed by Eutyches and Tychicus.

COLOSSAE

Home

CALMUS SPIED A SEAT IN ONE CORNER of the crowded room and quickly moved toward it. He scanned the room as he sat, looking to see who was there and had noticed him enter. The presence of slaves was not unusual, since they were ever present in the house, especially when serving the meal. But this would be the first time slaves were allowed to join a meeting of the church. True, Calmus had been invited into the last meeting by Archippus, but that was only in the closing moments. And Calmus's presence had served more as an illustration than anything else. Today represented a significant change in how things were done. Archippus recognized it as such and suggested that Calmus and the other slaves not participate in the meal. That, he thought, would have been too much for some, especially Philemon. But now, as they readied for the second half of the evening, all of Philemon's slaves were present, as were those who accompanied the other guests. Thus the room was more crowded than usual.

He noticed at least two others who had not been at the meal. *Late arrivals*, Calmus thought. One was Nympha, Philemon's cousin. He recognized her from the last meeting, but the man with her was not someone he had seen before. As he observed the man's dress and the attention he showed to Nympha, Calmus concluded that he was one of Nympha's household slaves, accompanying her from Laodicea.

Archippus entered and greeted Nympha and the man with her, who had found a pair of seats. "I am grateful for your presence here this evening, Sister Nympha." And then, turning to the man, he said, "Welcome, Magnus. I am pleased that you accompanied Nympha to Colossae and accepted our invitation to attend the meeting. I will be most curious to hear your thoughts about what goes on here this evening." Without waiting for a reply, he left mistress and slave and began looking for a seat.

Archippus had spent the week in Colossae investigating some troubling reports. Some teachings were circulating that seemed to be causing a degree of disturbance, and he wanted to get to the bottom of it. While he wasn't confident he fully understood the content of the teachings, he had found enough to prepare a report. He was fairly certain that their source was the local Jewish population who had become followers of Jesus. Their emphasis on the distinctiveness of the Jewish people and their practices seemed to be gaining currency among some. This was not a new challenge for the church. He knew, for instance, that similar teachings had arisen among the churches in the nearby province of Galatia. Barnabas, a traveling companion of Paul, had visited Colossae on a few occasions and related the difficulties facing the churches in Galatia.¹

As Archippus assessed the group in the room, he spied Calmus sitting over to the side. Picking up a stool, he made his way over to the corner and sat next to the slave. "I thought I might join you here this evening, since it is I who instigated the whole situation," he said with a smile. Calmus offered a slight nod in return but uttered no sound. He was far too nervous to speak freely. He was already uncomfortable sitting in the room; the idea that a slave would speak and act like a free man was not something he was ready for.

The last of the guests entered the room, and along with them Philemon and Apphia. Philemon was tired from searching for Onesimus in Hierapolis, and the lack of success had left him in a sour mood. Calmus hadn't been present when Apphia had told him about Archippus's decision that slaves meet together with the church, but he was sure it wasn't received well. He noticed that the couple greeted Nympha, but no greeting was offered to Magnus. Apphia seemed ready to acknowledge Magnus and perhaps the slaves belonging to the other guests, but she was pushed along by her husband, who seemed anxious to find a seat.

Once everyone had arrived and was settled, Archippus stood up and moved to the center of the room to welcome them.

"Brothers and sisters, greetings in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is my pleasure to be with you again as you gather together. I have enjoyed speaking with many of you this week and look forward to spending more time with you in the future. As we all know, our dear brother Epaphras is still in prison, and we hope he will be released soon. In the meantime, I will continue to check in with you from time to time as I oversee the churches here in the Lycus Valley."

Archippus then turned to Philemon and Apphia, who were sitting together on a bench. Extending both hands toward them he said, "We want to thank our hosts this evening, Philemon and Apphia, who have so often opened their home to us and provided for us in so many

ways. We are indebted to you both. And we are happy to see you again, Brother Philemon. You were traveling last time we met, and we greatly missed your presence.”

Philemon gave a stiff nod of appreciation and waved his hand, while Apphia attempted to feign a smile. It was clear that although they appreciated the public display of gratitude, they weren't completely comfortable with the new composition of the group.

Archippus told the group that he had spent the week gathering information and was now ready to comment about some of the teachings that were spreading among the Christians in Colossae. As he began speaking, Calmus thought he heard a knock on the front door. He assumed it was more guests arriving late and wondered where they would sit, since the room was already at capacity.

He risked a look at Philemon and realized that he too had heard the knock and was looking around the room with the same thought. Calmus concluded he couldn't sit any longer. It was one thing for a slave to act like a free person by sitting in the presence of his master and guests. But it was quite another when a free person had no place to sit. He decided he would quietly get up and leave his seat for the late arrivals. Although he would miss the meeting, at least he would be able to face his master once the guests had left.

At that moment, the house steward led two people to the room, one of whom Calmus thought he recognized. As the two entered the doorway, Calmus couldn't believe what he was seeing. It was Onesimus! The runaway slave was standing in the middle of the doorway, escorted by someone Calmus had never met before. *What audacity*, he thought. *After all this time he arrives back here like nothing is wrong. And what's more, he does so by entering through the front door and acting like a guest. What pluck! Philemon will surely react to all of this.*

These thoughts were confirmed as he looked over at Philemon. Calmus suspected that were it not for the presence of all of the guests, his master would have already leapt from his chair and dragged Onesimus out into the courtyard for interrogation and flogging. It was clear Philemon was struggling with how to react and what to say.

“Ah, Tychicus and Onesimus, what a pleasant surprise,” Archippus said before Philemon could speak. “We were just beginning. Your timing is perfect.” Calmus noticed that Archippus had a barely concealed smile on his face and wondered whether he had somehow orchestrated the timing of the pair's arrival.

Tychicus escorted Onesimus to the center, where every eye in the room was on him. “I believe you know Brother Tychicus?” Archippus asked Philemon.

Philemon grunted affirmatively, but his eyes were fixed on

Onesimus.

“Tychicus has just arrived from Ephesus, and he has brought Onesimus with him.”

Philemon’s eyes widened as he finally learned where the slave had been all this time.

“While in Ephesus,” Archippus continued, “Onesimus spent time with the apostle Paul and the brothers and sisters who meet in Demas’s home.”

At this statement Philemon turned his face toward Archippus in stunned disbelief. “He was in Ephesus? With Demas? With Paul? You knew this?” he demanded. “How long did you know?”

“At this point, that is irrelevant,” Archippus replied, still smiling politely. “What’s more important is that Paul realized you must be wondering why Onesimus was delayed so long in returning and decided to send him home as quickly as possible.”

Philemon got up from his seat and, taking a step toward Onesimus, said, “Yes, he is here, and that means I can deal with him.”

“Yes, of course, but first,” Tychicus said, reaching into his pouch, “I have a letter here from Paul in which he explains the situation. I think you will find it to be a satisfactory explanation of the events leading up to this evening.”

“I shall read it with great interest later,” Philemon said, becoming impatient with the whole scene. “But now, if you will excuse me, I’d like to speak with my slave alone.” He emphasized the last word.

“I think you misunderstand me,” Tychicus countered, holding up a hand to halt the slave master. “The letter is not only for you. It is addressed to everyone in your household, to Brother Archippus, and everyone gathered here this evening.”

Archippus, deciding it was time to intervene, moved between Philemon and Tychicus. “Brothers and sisters,” he said, “I suggest that we suspend hearing my report and allow this letter to be read to us instead.”

Everyone in the room voiced their eagerness to hear the letter, and although Philemon would rather have dismissed everyone so he could get to the bottom of Onesimus’s disappearance and theft, he reluctantly decided to sit down and wait.

As Philemon rejoined Apphia, Tychicus unrolled the single sheet of papyrus and began reading.

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Brother Timothy,

To Philemon our beloved and fellow worker, Apphia our sister, Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church that meets in your home:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord

Jesus Christ.

I thank my God always every time I remember you in my prayers, since I am well informed about your love and faith for the Lord Jesus as well as for all of the believers. And I pray that your generous faith will become even more effective as it becomes obvious all of the good things that we share in Christ. Indeed, I am already greatly encouraged by your love, brother, demonstrated as it is by the well-known hospitality you offer to all believers.

It is with this in mind that I make a request of you. Of course, if I thought it was at all necessary, I would issue a command rather than a request. But as one who is now both old and a prisoner, I have learned it is better to appeal to you on the basis of love.

My request is on behalf of Onesimus. He has become like a son to me here in prison, and I admit feeling a bit like a father to him. I realize that in the past he was somewhat useless to you, but I think you will find him to be quite useful to both of us.

I am sending him back to you, but admit that I am torn. Truth be known, I would have rather kept him here with me, as a sort of replacement for you, while I am here in prison for the gospel. But I didn't want to do anything without your consent, nor give the appearance of pressuring you to do something I know you would willingly do anyway.

Who knows, perhaps this is why you were separated from one another for a short while. So you can have him back in a more permanent way—no longer as just a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother. That's what he has become to me, but how much more so to you, both in the flesh and the Lord.

So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has somehow wronged you, or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it (and I know I need not mention how you owe me). Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord and refresh my heart in Christ. I write to you confident that you will do even more than I ask.

One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I hope through your prayers, to be with you soon.

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

When Tychicus finished, he rolled up the sheet and handed it to Onesimus.

All eyes had been on the slave master as they listened to Tychicus read. The letter had not been what anyone expected. Although to the whole church, it didn't address anything about their worship or community practices. Some had expected that Paul was going to respond to some of the things Archippus had come to investigate.

Instead it focused on the matter between Philemon and his slave. While some in the room knew Onesimus had gone missing recently, no one, except Archippus, had known he was with Paul. Most of them, especially those who owned slaves, would have expected Philemon to severely punish Onesimus and perhaps even sell him. But the slave's return, the letter, and Paul's declaration that he had become the father of a changed man . . . All of this left them unsure of the next step. Paul had given no clear instructions about what to do next. He hadn't asked Philemon to refrain from punishing him, and he also didn't say that he should free Onesimus. The letter seemed magnificently ambiguous and direct at that same time. Paul didn't risk commanding his friend to do anything. Yet, he asked him to receive the slave as a beloved brother and to treat him as he would the rest of the saints.

"What will Philemon do?" they wondered.

EPHESUS

Epilogue

THE KNOCK ON THE DOOR ECHOED IN THE ROOM.

An old man sat at the table, papyrus sheets scattered into small piles in front of him. He'd been organizing them but now was distracted by one in particular.

The second knock was a bit louder and captured the attention of the old man this time.

"Yes, please come in," he called to the person on the other side of the door.

A young man entered the room, carrying a jug of water and a plate of bread and fruit.

"Here is water and food, master. They told me you were thirsty after returning from your visit with Bishop Ignatius."

"Thank you, Balbos, I am hungry. And I am getting too old to be making trips to Smyrna on short notice."

Balbos placed the jug and plate on the table next to the old man, who had yet to look up at him. Instead he kept studying the sheet of papyrus.

"Bishop Onesimus, perhaps you should rest for a few minutes?"

The old man sighed, looked up, and reluctantly put down the papyrus. "I am sorry, Balbos. My mind is preoccupied today. Brother Ignatius will soon sail for Neapolis, and from there he shall journey to Rome."

"And what will happen to him in Rome?" Balbos asked.

"I am not sure, but if Emperor Trajan continues to insist we worship him, then I suspect our beloved brother will meet his death soon after he reaches Rome."

Onesimus was silent for a while, and Balbos could tell he was lost deep in thought again.

Bishop Onesimus

Paul's letter to Philemon ends without resolution and only raises more questions. Did Philemon forgive his slave and treat him as a beloved brother? Did Onesimus ever visit Paul again? And perhaps even more curious, why was this letter preserved as part of the New Testament? None of these questions have clear answers. But since biblical scholars, like nature, abhor a vacuum, there have been some suggestions along the way.

We do know that there was a bishop named Onesimus who served the church at Ephesus during the reign of Emperor Trajan. We learn about this Onesimus in Ignatius's letter to the Ephesians. Ignatius was the bishop of Antioch when he was arrested and sent to Rome for trial (AD 110?). As he traveled through Asia Minor, word reached some of the churches (Tralles, Magnesia, and Ephesus) that Ignatius would be stopping in Smyrna. These churches then sent messengers to Smyrna to speak with and show support for Ignatius. He responded by writing a letter to each of the three churches.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Ignatius refers to Bishop Onesimus by name three times in the first six chapters. Some have noticed how the words and phrases in the letter to the Ephesians are very similar to those in Philemon. This led New Testament scholar John Knox to suggest in 1935 that Ignatius had deliberately patterned parts of his letter after Paul's letter to Philemon and that the Bishop Onesimus of Ephesus and the slave mentioned in Philemon were one and the same person.^a He also suggested that Onesimus's presence in the office of bishop may explain how and why the letter to Philemon was preserved.

But if Onesimus, the slave whom Paul asked from his master for a career of religious service, was the bishop of Ephesus about AD 110, it is altogether likely that he held the same office a score of years earlier. If so, he was at Ephesus when a corpus of Paul's letters was published; indeed, that publication would probably have been done under his oversight.^b

At the end of the day, those familiar with Knox's hypothesis have found it ingenious and interesting, but not completely convincing. While church tradition has sometimes suggested it, in reality, we possess no evidence demonstrating that

Philemon's slave Onesimus became the bishop of Ephesus. What happened after Philemon read the letter and the reasons why the letter was preserved remain a mystery.

a John Knox, *Philemon Among the Letters of Paul: A New View of Its Place and Importance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935).

b Knox, *Philemon Among the Letters of Paul*, 56.

"Is there anything else preoccupying your mind today, master?" Balbos inquired.

The question brought Onesimus back to the present. "Yes, Balbos, my mind is occupied with the past." He said this as his attention was once again drawn to the sheet of papyrus.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Balbos asked hopefully.

"Yes, there is," Onesimus replied. The old man began gathering the papyri on the table into one pile.

"The bishops have decided to gather together all the letters and documents written to their churches by the first apostles. Those that still exist are being sent here to Ephesus. As bishop of Ephesus, and the last person alive to have met the apostle Paul, it is my task to gather together the letters Paul sent to the churches here and in the Lycus Valley."

Onesimus handed the stack to Balbos.

"I would like for you to take these and have them placed with the others on the community bookshelf. Once all of the letters are here, we will begin copying them for others."

Balbos took the stack of papyri and began moving towards the door, but was stopped short by Onesimus.

"Wait, Balbos, please." Onesimus was looking at the single piece of papyrus again. After a few moments he handed it to Balbos as well.

"Place this among the letters of Paul, as well. But on the bottom, please. No need to put it on top."

"But what is it?" Balbos asked.

"It's a story that needs to be told."

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NOTES

Chapter 5: Ephesus: Life as a Slave

¹Seneca, “Letter 47: On Masters and Slaves,” 10-11, in *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, trans. R. M. Gummere, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 1:307.

Chapter 6: Laodicea: The Pursuit

¹Criangoras, *Anthologia Graeca* 9.284 (Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *St. Paul’s Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1983], 51).

²Adapted from [Philippians 2:6-11](#).

Chapter 13: Colossae: Home

¹According to [Colossians 4:10](#), Barnabas is known to the church at Colossae. Whether he ever visited there is not clear from the evidence.

²[Philemon 1-25](#), author’s translation.

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PRAISE FOR *A Week in the Life of a Slave*

“There’s no one better to take us into the daily plight and experiences of a first-century Roman slave than John Byron, who has distinguished himself as a specialist in this area through two important academic books and several articles. Here he blends expertise and imagination together in a winsome invitation into the lives of Paul, Philemon, and, most importantly, Onesimus, the slave whose coming to faith challenged Philemon to live up to his own.”

David A. deSilva, author of *Day of Atonement: A Novel of the Maccabean Revolt*

“We underestimate the power of a well-told story in order to reconstruct the historical drama of the New Testament. John Byron shows himself not only to be a fantastic storyteller but also a creative scholar who provides cultural insights into Paul’s world that we would not otherwise understand. We follow the slave Onesimus as he leaves his home, meets Paul, and eventually becomes a Christian leader renowned in Asia Minor. Any student studying the New Testament will find this book both riveting and a rich invitation to enter the New Testament world.”

Gary M. Burge, professor of New Testament, Calvin Theological Seminary

“John Byron has written an imaginative and historically informed novella about slavery in the ancient world, specifically in the early church. He takes you into the story of Paul, Philemon, Onesimus, the cities of Asia Minor, and the plight of slaves. It is filled with information about the ancient world, living conditions, gods and deities, travel, and what it was like to be a slave in the first century. Byron is one person I know with the knowledge of Greco-Roman slavery and the literary brilliance to make a book like this both fun to read and genuinely educational. A must-read!”

Michael F. Bird, lecturer in theology at Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia

“In the New Testament, Paul’s letter to Philemon is rather small—a mere page or two. But Byron has managed to reveal a massive world of Paul’s imprisonment, busy ministry work in the Lycus valley, broken relationships, new friendships, and the messy reality of life in

first-century churches, full of both mundane problems but also great beauty and grace. Learning through story is a gift for the learner, and Byron is an excellent teacher.”

Nijay K. Gupta, associate professor of New Testament, Portland Seminary

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



John Byron (PhD, University of Durham) is professor of New Testament at Ashland Theological Seminary in Ashland, Ohio. He is the author of several books, including *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity* and *Recent Research on Paul and Slavery*.

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